BEST BUDDIES CLUB: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE NON-DISABLED
PEER PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIALLY INTERACTING WITH STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES

by

Joanna Cavender

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experience of non-disabled peers serving as a “best buddy” to high school students with a disability in the southeastern United States. The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism Theory, where learning between two diverse learners occurs through social interaction with one another, specifically a high school student with a disability and a non-disabled peer buddy. Participants in this study (N=14) were selected from three different high schools throughout one school district, each with active extracurricular Best Buddies Clubs in place. Data were collected through 1:1 interviews, focus group interviews, and written responses from the participants. Qualitative data analysis resulted in the development of four main themes: shared experience of the nondisabled peers, pinpointed areas of self-growth, challenges, and a change in their perception of students with disabilities. The essence of the study was found to be that serving as a buddy to a student with a disability was an overall positive experience that allowed participants to pinpoint areas of self-growth and changes in their perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Implications of the findings encourage nondisabled peers to continue to spread awareness about the club in order to foster the social inclusions of students with disabilities. Implications for staff members and school personnel encourage the continued implementation of programs like the Best Buddies Club to create and facilitate opportunities to successfully increase the social interaction between students with disabilities and their peers. Future research should attempt to include the perspective of the students with disabilities as well as to further document the impact programs like the Best Buddies Club can have.

Keywords: peer networks, inclusion, disabilities, peer interaction, high school
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Dedication

To my husband, Christopher, for believing there is nothing in this world I cannot do. Your support and love have gotten me here. To my son Bryce, everything I do is for you. You are our entire world, and I cannot wait to see what amazing things you will do with your life! To my mother, Debby, the most giving person I have ever known. You taught me the importance of hard work and that caring for others is the greatest gift.

Most importantly, to my beloved students to whom this dissertation is ultimately dedicated. You teach me every single day how to be a better person. You show unwavering love and kindness to others, no matter what. My life’s work is to help make this world a more accepting place for each of you to live in!
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Dr. Battige, your feedback and suggestion of adding additional sites for my study truly enhanced my research. I learned so much by expanding to multiple sites. I am thankful for you pushing me further in this experience.
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List of Abbreviations

Education of All Handicapped Children (EHA)
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
Individualized Education Program (IEP)
Intellectual Disability (ID)
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
Person Centered Planning (PCP)
Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The path to acceptance and equality has been a tumultuous journey for individuals with disabilities. With roughly 14% of students in America receiving special education services in public school settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), advocates continue to strive for better inclusion not only academically, but socially, in school environments. Despite the progress made to better include students with disabilities in school systems and classrooms across the United States, the hard reality is that students with disabilities often remain socially isolated with limited interactions with their non-disabled peers (Carter, 2018; Chung et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2016; Marder et al., 2017; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018; Stiefel et al., 2018; Ziegler et al., 2020). The problem addressed in this research study was the limited social inclusion of students with disabilities at the high school level. This study observed social interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peer buddies through extracurricular activities planned through the Best Buddies Club and observed the relationship between the two groups. The central research question addressed in this study was: What are the experiences of high school non-disabled peers who socially interact with students with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?” The sub-questions that will be addressed are: How has interacting socially with students with disabilities impacted the non-disabled peer buddies’ perception of people with disabilities? How has frequent interaction with their buddy helped them recognize and overcome barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities?

This chapter provides a brief history of special education in public schools. A look at the social and theoretical context of the inclusion of students with disabilities are addressed. Subsequently, the research problem, questions, and significance of the study are discussed. This
chapter concludes by clearly defining the research questions and pertinent term definitions related to the study.

**Background**

Special Education in the United States has drastically transformed over the past century. Society has emerged from the dark periods of institutionalization and abandonment of individuals with disabilities to a realm of inclusivity and striving for acceptance for all in everyday life. Below is a brief history of where we have been, where we are today, and where we strive to be in the future in regard to educating individuals with disabilities.

**History of Special Education**

Prior to society's awakening, a disability was viewed as a liability in participating in daily life (Winzer, 2009). In an analysis of the history of Special Education, Spaulding and Pratt (2015) describe the unimaginable hardships faced by individuals with disabilities and their families in an era where shame surrounded disability, and families often felt the need to hide loved ones who were disabled. People with disabilities were cast aside from society and placed in separate facilities, often well outside their community (Winzer, 2009).

It was not until the civil rights movement in the 1960s that the country began to see all people as equal and deserving of basic human rights. Historical cases such as Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) fought initially to desegregate schools and provide educational equality for all races. However, the rulings and laws passed after these court cases also applied to individuals with disabilities, thus winning them the right to public education (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). In fact, Brown vs. Board of Education is often referred to as the starting point for equal education opportunities for students with disabilities (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). This significant point in history serves as the initial step toward the inclusion of individuals with disabilities.
By the 1970s, society’s attitudes toward people with disabilities began to change. Two basic ideologies formed: normalization and mainstreaming (Winzer, 2009). Deinstitutionalization began to occur, and people with disabilities were moved out of large institutions and into community-based living arrangements. This meant a "return to the community, maintenance in the community, the respect of other citizens, and acceptance by peers and others in the culture" (Winzer, 2009, p. 108). This precise statement about people with disabilities gaining the respect of peers and becoming part of the community in which they live is what this research study aimed to further facilitate.

In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was passed. This law required a free and appropriate education for all students and introduced the term "least restrictive environment," referring to the educational setting (Brock, 2018; LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Wehmeyer, 2021; Winzer, 2009; & Zigmond et al., 2009). This law also advocated for accommodations and modifications to be provided during assessments for students and the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (LaNear, 2007; Wehmeyer, 2021; Winzer, 2009; & Zigmond, 2009). The field of education continued to modify and adjust the educational priorities for students with disabilities resulting in the integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools (Winzer, 2009).

In 1990, EHA became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which further expanded the disability categories to include 13 disability types, defined transition services, and made assistive technology more accessible (Winzer, 2009). A fundamental shift began to take place in regards to how individuals with disabilities were viewed and educated in public school systems (Winzer, 2009).

In 1997, an amendment was made to IDEA that did not specifically mandate inclusion,
but strongly recommended consideration of educational placements in the general education classrooms. Court rulings asserted that students could be placed in a special education setting only when educational success could not be achieved in the general education classroom despite the use of supplementary aids and services (Winzer, 2009).

In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized and renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This reauthorization emphasized high standards and called for accountability in the school systems to help all underperforming students (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). The act stated that by 2014, all students would be proficient in core school subjects. In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act required teachers to be highly qualified in their teaching areas (Winzer, 2009). After years of steep criticism for placing too much emphasis on standardized testing and widespread federal control, NCLB was reauthorized and renamed again to become the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) (Darrow, 2016). ESSA allowed for more state and district-led control of educational progress standards and accountability (Darrow, 2016).

Perhaps the most pertinent ruling for this study is the U.S. Department's Office for Civil Rights which mandated, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, that school districts offer equal access to extracurricular activities to students with disabilities (Argan, 2017). Extracurricular activities can provide students with an opportunity to engage with their school and allow students to feel connected to the community (Argan, 2017). This study involves an extracurricular school club (the Best Buddies Club) that has the sole purpose of including all and fostering a sense of community. Although most research focuses on inclusion in a classroom setting, student involvement in extracurricular activities “represents an authentic extension of inclusive practice” (Argan, 2017, p.2).
Inclusion Today

Current research shows that although the educational lives of students with disabilities have dramatically improved over the years, progress has seemed to stall in recent years (Brock, 2018; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Brock (2018) found that despite the progress made over the past 40 years, the majority of students with intellectual disabilities are placed in restrictive environments and spend little to no time alongside their non-disabled peers. This underscores the need for this study and for continuous improvement in the field of special education in public school settings across our country. We must continue to improve and grow in order to achieve true inclusion for all.

Winzer (2009) profoundly argued, "It is now very generally agreed that people with disabilities have a natural and rightful place in society and that schools should mirror this broader commitment" (p.212). This is the basis of this study as I hope to further solidify the place in our community for all individuals with disabilities. Although we have come a very long way in achieving inclusive practices for individuals with disabilities, there is still room for improvement in school systems across our country to better incorporate students with disabilities in the school community as a whole.

Social Context

School systems nationwide are familiar with the current laws and mandates for educating students with disabilities. The term inclusion now reaches much further than the classroom. Social activists continue to call for more inclusive practices for all individuals. This study focuses on the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities in a public high school setting. Social interaction is vital to the emotional well-being of all individuals, but especially adolescents. Carter (2018) found, "interactions with peers provide access to an array of social
and emotional supports, build valuable social capital, expand learning opportunities, and promote participation in school and community activities" (p.1). It is well documented in the literature that students with disabilities greatly benefit from interaction with general education peers (Carter, 2019, Rossetti & Keenan, 2019). Carter and Hughes (2005) highlighted the multitude of benefits to social interaction with peers, ranging from social skill development, improved academic development, development of friendships, and enhanced quality of life.

As the benefits for the students with disabilities have been thoroughly researched and documented, a small amount of research has shown that non-disabled peers can also benefit greatly from interacting with individuals with disabilities. Previous research documented that individuals who participated in programs like the one in this study reported personal growth and the development of new friendships (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2001; Marder et al., 2017).

Through the implementation of this study, the experience of the non-disabled peers was clearly depicted. Results from this study could help other school systems see the benefits of programs like this for both populations of students and elicit greater participation in extracurricular programs focused on the social inclusion of students with disabilities in schools nationwide.

**Theoretical Context**

Although the idea of inclusive education was brought about in the United States by the Civil Rights movement (Wehmeyer et al., 2021), research published by the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky is now considered a major foundation for inclusive special education practices (Gindis, 1999). Prior to Vygotsky’s work, the western world had adopted Piaget’s (1936) Theory of Cognitive Development, where a child’s maturational process guides their learning (Gindis,
Vygotsky (1978) contradicted this model and credited social interaction with others as the guiding force for learning and development. Vygotsky found that social experiences shape the way that students think and interpret the world around them (Vygotsky, 1978). If we hope to elicit change and encourage social inclusion of students with disabilities, we must facilitate proper social interaction between the two diverse populations of students.

Previous research focuses on the social inclusion of students with disabilities through the implementation of peer networks or buddy programs. Components of these programs typically include a training session for non-disabled peers and the facilitators, semi-structured events or times for interaction to occur, and supervision by a field professional to ensure quality interactions occur (Asmus et al., 2017; Copeland et al., 2004; Herbert et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2001; Schaefer et al., 2018; Ziegler et al., 2020). These studies lay the groundwork for others to successfully implement these programs to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

Previous research also demonstrates that facilitating social interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers allows for personal growth from non-disabled peers along with the development of friendships (Athamanah et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2001). This study hopes to build on this previous research and add the perspective of the non-disabled peer buddy and their unique experience of socially interacting with students with disabilities in the high school setting. By doing this, others can recognize the vital role non-disabled peers play in improving the lives of individuals with disabilities and building a community that embraces their differences. This study can provide new insights into the personal growth and unique experience of the non-disabled peer buddy.
Situation to Self

I have been a Special Education teacher for students with Moderate Intellectual Disabilities for 11 years. Five of those years were in middle school and six in a high school setting. I discovered my passion for working with students with disabilities as a teenager when I was teaching swim lessons at a public pool. A mother approached me one day and asked if I would be willing to teach her son with a disability how to swim. I was unsure if I was up for the task, but said “yes” anyway! Fate would have it that this little boy would not only inspire me to become a Special Education teacher, but a decade later, I would be his teacher again in high school.

My first year teaching, I was hired to open the first self-contained Special Education unit at a Title 1 middle school in a suburban area outside of Atlanta. I can remember the vast reactions from the students and staff members as they welcomed this new population of students into their school setting. This school had never interacted with students that had the level of physical, medical, and intellectual needs that my students possessed. Although the majority of responses were abundantly welcoming and kind, a few people greeted us with uncertainty and trepidation.

As the years went on, I strived to get my students involved in every aspect of the school community. We took up small “jobs” around the school, like delivering mail and planting a garden. With support from my colleagues, one of my students was able to join the cheerleading squad as an honorary member and another joined the basketball team as a "manager." I would take my entire class to the basketball games to cheer on our cheerleader and player! The school and community rallied behind my students as they participated with their peers. In one game at the end of the season, the coach put my student in the actual game, and everyone went wild! I
remember him looking up at me in the stands with the biggest smile on his face! It was at that moment I knew I was fulfilling my purpose in life. The comradery from the other cheerleaders and basketball players is exactly the type of peer relationships I continue to strive to facilitate for my students. The coaches, my fellow colleagues, and my school administration looked to me as the advocate for my students and enthusiastically helped carry out my ambitions for them to be included.

I firmly believe that the more time people, both students and adults, spend with individuals with disabilities, the more they grow as an individual to become more compassionate, caring, and accepting of those who are different. This is the basis of motivation for the completion of this research study.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that students with disabilities tend to remain socially isolated from their non-disabled peers at the high school level (Carter, 2018; Chung et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2016; Marder et al., 2017; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2018; Stiefel et al., 2017; Ziegler et al., 2020). Despite federally mandated legislation (i.e., IDEA, 2004) that requires students with disabilities to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers, research shows that students with disabilities remain on the periphery of school environments nationwide (Brock, 2018; Carter, 2018; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018; & Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

A multitude of barriers exist, making it difficult for students with disabilities to socially interact with their peers (Carter, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016; Sigstad, 2017). One research-based intervention designed to increase social interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers is the implementation of peer networks or buddy systems (Asmus et al., 2017; Farley, 2014; Herbert et al., 2020; Marder et al., 2017). This study examined the frequent, quality
interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peer buddies. The study describes the experiences of non-disabled peer buddies on how frequent social interactions with peers with disabilities affected them and their perception of individuals with disabilities. This study also pinpointed common barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities in the high school setting and the ways peer buddies overcame those barriers (Copeland et al., 2004).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experience of non-disabled peers who socially interact with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club in suburban high schools. For this study, the shared social exchanges between students with and without disabilities are generally defined as social interaction. Activities and events for the Best Buddies Club were facilitated by a special education teacher to ensure quality interactions occurred between the students with disabilities and non-disabled peer buddies. The theory guiding this study was Social Constructivism, as it relates to the learning attributed to social interaction between two diverse learners (Vygotsky, 1978). The goal of the study was to clearly depict the overall experience a non-disabled peer has when participating as a peer buddy in a high school setting.

**Significance of the Study**

The participants of this study described their experiences of socially interacting with students with disabilities as a member of the Best Buddies Club. This study further supports previous research in the field, demonstrating the value of quality social interactions between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Hymel & Katz, 2019). This study holds theoretical, empirical, and practical significance outlined below.

**Theoretical Significance**
The Social Learning Theory, known today as the Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), stresses the importance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling. The Social Cognitive Theory applies to this research study as the focus is on social interactions between non-disabled students and their peers with disabilities. Bandura (1977) posited that new patterns of behavior are learned through direct experience or observing others, highlighting the importance of reciprocal interaction. This underscores the importance of the study at hand to further validate the need for students with disabilities to experience social interactions with adequate models in order to develop these skills themselves.

The theory guiding this study was the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory describes the learning that takes place through the social interactions of two diverse learners. Further examining the social interaction between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers could provide significant insight into barriers that are perpetuating the social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level.

**Empirical Significance**

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature addressing the problem of social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level. Sparse data exist presenting the perspective of the non-disabled peer on social interactions with students with disabilities at the high school level (Carter et al., 2019). The current literature on social inclusion of students with disabilities at the high school level shows a continued state of social isolation for this population of students (Carter, 2018; Marder et al., 2017; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018). The literature is lacking studies that provide the perspective on non-disabled peers on this issue (Carter et al., 2019). A better understanding of the barriers that exist for quality social
interactions to occur between students with disabilities and their peers at the high school level could lead to better social inclusion of individuals with disabilities (Hymel & Katz, 2019).

**Practical Significance**

The results of this study could improve the programs available at the high school level aimed at socially interacting with students with disabilities by empowering the non-disabled peer buddy to help address this problem. Findings from this study could not only help students with disabilities be better included socially in school environments, but allow non-disabled peers to serve as leaders in facilitating this inclusion and interaction. Through the presentation of the peer’s perspective and identification of possible barriers to social inclusion that they perceived, vital insight could be gained for key stakeholders and school personnel (Copeland et al., 2004). The findings of this study are significant because they could inform key stakeholders and school officials of the mutually beneficial aspects of enacting a Best Buddies Club on both the lives of the students with disabilities and the non-disabled peers (Athamanah et al., 2020).

**Research Questions**

Non-disabled peers play a pivotal role in the social inclusion of students with disabilities at the high school level. Peer networks, like the Best Buddies Club, have been found to be effective at eliciting quality social interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Carter, 2018; Copeland et al., 2004; Farley, 2014; Herbert et al., 2020; Hochman et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2017; Ziegler et al., 2020). This study will focus on the shared experience of the non-disabled peer buddies and how serving in this role impacted their view of individuals with disabilities and their ability to identify and overcome social interaction barriers with individuals with disabilities.

**Central Research Question**
What are the experiences of high school non-disabled students who socially interact with peers with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?”

**Sub Question One**

How does interacting socially with peers with disabilities impact the non-disabled student’s perception of people with disabilities?

**Sub Question Two**

How does frequent interaction with their peers with disabilities help non-disabled students recognize and overcome barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities?

**Definitions**

There are several terms that are frequently mentioned in the literature related to the social inclusion of students with disabilities. Terms relevant to this study are defined below.

1. *Best Buddies Club* - defined by the Best Buddies International chapter as a program that aims to build one-to-one friendships between people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), offering social interactions while improving the quality of life and level of inclusion for a population that is often isolated and excluded. Through their participation, people with IDD form meaningful connections with their peers, gain self-confidence and self-esteem, and share interests, experiences, and activities that many other individuals enjoy. (Best Buddies International, 2021)

2. *Inclusion* – as defined from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004),
To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are non-disabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA Sec.300.114; Wehmeyer, 2021)

3. *Intellectual Disability* - replacing the term “mental retardation.” Defined by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities as “characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills and this disability originates before the age of 18” (Cheung, 2013, p.322).

4. *Non-disabled peer*— for this study, a non-disabled peer is a high school student that does not receive special education services. The non-disabled peers in this study voluntarily served as members of the extra-curricular Best Buddies Club.

5. *Zone of Proximal Development*— “where students have incomplete but relatively equal expertise—each [member] possessing some knowledge or skill but requiring the others' contribution in order to make progress” (Schreiber & Valle, 2013, p. 3).

**Summary**

Investigating the problem of students with disabilities experiencing social isolation from their peers at the high school level, despite the federally mandated inclusion efforts, supports the purpose of this study. This transcendental phenomenological study describes the shared experience of non-disabled peers who socially interact with peers with disabilities through their
participation in the Best Buddies Club at a suburban high school. The findings of this study could help inform key stakeholders and school officials of the mutually beneficial aspects of implementing a Best Buddies Club on both the lives of the students with disabilities and the non-disabled peers. Studying this phenomenon aims to fill a gap in the literature by describing the experiences this interaction has on the non-disabled peer buddy and the way they view individuals with disabilities. This research study also helps identify barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities at the high school level, thus giving key stakeholders and school officials areas to pinpoint to help resolve the problem.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Students with disabilities are more likely to experience loneliness (Carter, 2018; Pallisera et al. 2016), have fewer friendships (Chung et al., 2019, Schwab, 2019; Petry, 2018), and encounter difficulties when establishing and maintaining friendships (Daughrity, 2019; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018; Herbert et al., 2020) than their nondisabled peers. Despite the efforts made at the federal level to physically include students with disabilities in environments with their nondisabled peers (IDEA, 2004), this population of individuals remains socially isolated (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Pallisera et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018). In order to better understand this problem, a thorough review of the literature is required.

A systematic review of the current research available related to the social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level was conducted. In the first section, the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Disability Theory and Social Constructivism, are discussed. Next, a synthesis of related literature regarding students with Intellectual Disability, factors contributing to social skill deficits in individuals with disabilities, the effects of promoting disability awareness, inclusion in schools today, and the importance of key stakeholders facilitating interactions between peers and students with disabilities is summarized. Lastly, the literature surrounding the development of peer buddy programs and any impact these programs have on non-disabled peers are addressed. In the end, a gap in the literature pertaining to the perspective of the non-disabled peer buddy on the interaction with students with disabilities is identified, presenting a viable need for the current study.
Theoretical Framework

Over the years, disability research has moved from a medical model, where disability is viewed as a sickness that must be treated or cured, to an environmental response to individuals with a disability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dirth & Branscombe, 2017). This study will first apply the constructs of the social model of Disability Theory, as the effects of interactions between people with and without disabilities is examined. For the purpose of this research study, Disability Theory will be applied in a social activism sense, maintaining a goal of producing more knowledge to support actions of inclusivity and acceptance toward individuals with disabilities in daily life. This study will move away from analyzing those with disabilities and instead focus on the impact interacting with them has on others. The social model of disability focuses on the environmental barriers and negative social attitudes that perpetuate the social isolation of individuals with disabilities. Through this lens, one can move past the functional limitations of the individual with a disability and instead take a closer look at the facilitators of social inclusion for all (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Dirth & Branscombe, 2017).

The participants in this research study interacted with students who had both physical and intellectual disabilities and received instruction on an adapted curriculum to meet their individualized educational needs. The constructs of Disability Theory, where disability is viewed as "a dimension of human difference and not as a defect" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.32) are what drove this study. Beyond these aspects, the main theoretical framework guiding this study was the Social Constructivism Theory.

Social Constructivism Theory

The Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) informed the central research question and sub-questions of this research study examining the social interaction between two
diverse groups of students at the high school level. The data collection measures and analysis process were also influenced by this theoretical framework, with a focus on eliciting the shared social experience and learning that occurred from the participants interacting with one another. The theoretical framework along with the review of related literature in the field, allowed for a better understanding of the experience of social interaction between non-disabled peers and students with disabilities.

This research study examined the social interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers and specifically how this interaction can drive learning or growth within the individual. The Social Constructivism Theory is the theoretical framework that drove this research study as the experience of interacting and learning from one another is precisely what was studied. Developed by the renowned psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the Social Constructivism Theory is based on learning occurring due to social and collaborative activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky applied this line of thought specifically to students with disabilities and the previous constructs placed upon them as the school systems segregated them to separate schools and classrooms. In the now-famous *Mind in Society* (1978), Vygotsky writes,

> Precisely because retarded children, when left to themselves, will never achieve well-elaborated forms of abstract thought, the school should make every effort to push them in that direction and to develop in them what is intrinsically lacking in their own development. (p.100)

The words were written over 40 years ago, yet students with disabilities continue to be secluded in school systems across the United States (Asmus et al., 2017; Brock, 2018; Giangreco, 2017; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Vygotsky's (1978) theories relied heavily on the learning that occurs from interaction with others. Within the constructs of social
constructivism, Vygotsky coined a term for the learning that occurs from two individuals from various backgrounds: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

The Zone of Proximal Development is defined as “where students have incomplete but relatively equal expertise—each [member] possessing some knowledge or skill but requiring the others' contribution in order to make progress” (Schreiber & Valle, 2013, p. 3). The idea is that with proper assistance from an advanced peer, a student is more capable than if left on their own (Gindis, 1999). This concept is the premise of the research study at hand as the interactions between students with disabilities with non-disabled peers are examined, and both parties involved are encouraged to learn from one another. This structure is described in a study conducted by Schreiber & Valle (2013), stating that this collaboration between “diverse others” can serve as a “vehicle for developing an appreciation of personal and cultural differences” (p.2). This study demonstrated how participation in social interactions with students with disabilities can foster learning from the non-disabled peer participants in regard to their view of individuals with disabilities and their interest in engaging with individuals with disabilities in the future.

Social constructivism is the theoretical framework guiding this study as social interaction, and the learning that occurs between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers is observed and analyzed. Through the application of this theoretical framework, this study closely examines the interaction between high school students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers during extracurricular social events. It is through these interactions that I examined and analyzed the potential learning that took place from both parties involved. The results of this study will contribute to the literature related to the learning that occurs through social interactions. The social constructs will be a valuable resource for application in future research studies.
Related Literature

The Social Constructivism Theory lays a theoretical framework for this study. In order to understand the contextual relevance of this research study, a thorough review of the most current related research in the field is required. A thorough understanding of disability and the barriers to social interaction individuals with disabilities encounter is needed for the contextual understanding and relevance of this study.

Intellectual Disability

The American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities defines intellectual disability as a “disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem-solving) and in adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills” (Molfenter & Hanley-Maxwell, 2017, p. 82) and is diagnosed before the age of 18. An individual is diagnosed with an intellectual disability based on a multitude of factors to include intellectual functioning, adaptive functioning, clinical assessment, and communication (Kauffman et al., 2018; Singh, 2016). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) is used to determine the level of intellectual disability one has. The DSM-V highlights that critical components of intellectual disability lie in deficits in the areas of reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thought, academic learning, judgment, and learning from experience (Patel et al., 2020). An individual with a score below 70 I.Q. is classified with an Intellectual Disability. Intellectual disability is further classified by level of impairment; Mild, Moderate, Severe, or Profound. The level of intellectual disability is determined based on clinical evaluation, standardized intellectual assessments (I.Q.), and adaptive functioning. Individuals fall into the category of Mild Intellectual Disability when an I.Q. score falls in the range of 50-69; Moderate Intellectual Disability when an I.Q. score is
between 35-49; Severe Intellectual Disability when an I.Q. score is between 20-34; and Profound Intellectual Disability if the IQ falls below 20 (Patel et al., 2020).

Research continues to pinpoint both genetic and environmental factors attributed to intellectual disability (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016; Harris, 2006; Karam et al., 2015). Prenatal causes of intellectual disability include chromosomal disorder, syndrome disorder, developmental disorders of brain formation, and environmental influences. Perinatal causes include intrauterine and neonatal disorders. Post-natal causes include head injuries, infection, degenerative disorders, seizure disorder, toxic metabolic disorder, malnutrition, and environmental deprivation (Harris, 2006). The most common forms of intellectual disability attributed to genetic factors are Down Syndrome, Prader Willi Syndrome, Angelman Syndrome, Williams Syndrome, and Fragile X (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016; Harris, 2006). A common form of intellectual disability attributed to environmental factors is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016).

Common characteristics of individuals with intellectual disabilities include social skill deficits, communication impairments, and engaging in atypical behavior (Carter, 2018). These deficits can make it increasingly more difficult for individuals with disabilities to engage in and maintain interactions with peers (Carter, 2018; Joseph et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Wehemeyer et al., 2016). An expert in the field of Special Education research, Erik W. Carter (2018), depicts the factors affecting social interaction between students with disabilities and their peers to be student-related, peer-related, support-related, opportunity, and contextual related factors. This review of the literature discusses the primary factors in detail. Student-related factors include social skill deficits, communication impairments, and behavioral challenges. Peer-related factors such as lack of knowledge and disability awareness will be addressed as they
relate to interacting with individuals with disabilities. Lastly, support-related factors that will be addressed are the staff and key stakeholders facilitating peer interactions using research-based methods. These areas will be further discussed in order to adequately detail the barriers attributing to the continued social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level.

**Social Skills Limitations**

Students with disabilities face a multitude of barriers when it comes to social interactions and sustaining friendships with peers in the school setting (Carter, 2018). It is well documented in the literature that students with disabilities have social skills deficits that negatively impact their quality of life (Carter, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016; Schafer et al., 2018; Sigstad, 2017). Numerous studies have focused on the social lives of students with significant disabilities and the scarcity of peer interactions and friendships (Petrina et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2016). Before addressing how these relationships can be facilitated and maintained, a closer look at the barriers to friendship is required.

In a study conducted by Lyons et al. (2016), teachers and parents assessed the social skills of 137 high school students with severe disabilities. The findings of their study showed that 82% of their participants had below-average scores on at least one of the seven social skills subdomains, with the lowest scores falling in the assertion, responsibility, and communication categories (Lyons et al., 2016). Similar findings were noted in a study conducted by Carter et al. (2014), where a substantial number of high school students with disabilities were rated as having low levels of competence in interpersonal relationships. The well-documented challenges in social skills for students with disabilities underscore the need for research-based interventions aimed at improving social-related skills. It is suggested that social skill instruction alone is not enough to address social skill deficits in students with disabilities. Instead, the skills are best taught with ongoing peer interactions and adequate adult support (Carter, 2018). Incorporating
peers in the interventions aimed at improving the social skill deficits is proven to have a positive effect on the social skill development of students with disabilities (Carter, 2018).

**Communication**

Another prominent area impacting social interaction for students with disabilities is communication. Communication is a cognitive process; therefore, it is highly likely that an individual with an intellectual disability will also have some level of speech and language issues (Bayat, 2017). Carter (2018) noted that students with disabilities "often have complex communication needs that can affect the quality and quantity of their social interactions with peers" (p. 3). Individuals with intellectual disabilities can have speech and language problems that range from “a mild delay in the emergence of syntax or conversational skills to severe problems with little or no functional speech that could result in serious communication difficulties” (Bayat, 2017, p. 478). Communication impairments can not only inhibit daily aspects of life, but negatively affect the overall quality of life for an individual with a disability (Pennington et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). Recent studies have focused on communication skill deficits as a major contributing factor to low-quality social interactions between students with disabilities and those around them (Joseph et al., 2021; Pennington et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020).

In a cross-sectional study conducted by Smith et al. (2020), communication skills were explored in individuals with intellectual disabilities, and the findings demonstrated the prevalence of communication difficulties for individuals with disabilities with unfamiliar communication partners. Studies like this one have confirmed the overwhelming need for individuals with disabilities to receive instruction on how to communicate appropriately as well
as be given the opportunity to practice this communication with peers and other nonfamiliar communication partners (Brady et al., 2016; Joseph et al., 2021).

For the purpose of this research study, it is important to mention the significant role the communication partner plays in a successful communication exchange with an individual with a communication deficit. In this research study, that communication partner is the non-disabled peer buddy. Brady et al. (2016) highlight that all individuals can communicate, and it is up to the communication partner to attempt to decipher their communication attempts and build on them. Research presented by Smith et al. (2020) further substantiates this claim and states that the communication partner alone can increase the frequency and quality of the interactions, thus increasing the social inclusion and quality of life for an individual with a significant disability and communication deficits. Communication is a basic human right and individuals with even the most severe disabilities can have ways to communicate. Key stakeholders must incorporate training for non-disabled peers on how to interact appropriately with individuals with the most significant communication deficits in order for quality interactions to occur (Brady et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020).

**Behavioral Limitations**

Lastly, students with disabilities can engage in behaviors atypical of those of their peers, thus causing yet another barrier to friendship and social inclusion. Individuals diagnosed with an intellectual disability are three to four times more likely to develop behavioral health problems than the general population (Levin & Hanson, 2020). Problematic behaviors typical of students with significant disabilities identified in the literature include aggressive behavior, self-injurious behavior, stereotypic or stemming behaviors, property destruction, tantrums, or inappropriate social behavior (Levin & Hanson, 2020; Lyons et al., 2016). Problem behavior is the most often
cited reason for the exclusion of individuals with disabilities from inclusive settings and placements (Levin & Hanson, 2020). Carter (2018) labels these behaviors as one of the student-related factors that limits social interaction with peers.

An awareness of these limitations and barriers must be acknowledged before the facilitation of peer interaction can take place. Interventions should be multifaceted and incorporate methods that address the social, communication, and behavioral deficits of students with disabilities. Key stakeholders must recognize these characteristics in order to adequately facilitate engagement in the school setting, interactions with their peers, and the community, as they prepare for the transition to post-secondary life.

**Inclusion**

In order to increase social interaction between non-disabled peers and students with disabilities, they must first be a part of their school environment. Meaning, non-disabled peers must be in frequent contact with students with disabilities for this type of awareness and acceptance to develop (Chae et al., 2019). Research shows that the interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers are more likely to occur when students with disabilities work alongside their peers and participate in shared activities (Giangreco, 2017). This movement, better known as inclusion in public schools, began with the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, mandating all children have the right to a free and appropriate education (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). From this point forward, the debate over where students with disabilities can receive the best education began and the term *inclusion* became a household word. The act has been updated and changed throughout the years and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. In regard to the placement of students with disabilities, federal law currently states,
to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in
public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are
non-disabled; Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with
disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity
of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary
aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA Sec. 300.114)

Since its conception, the implementation of inclusion in public schools has and continues to
evolve. Molfenter and Hanley-Maxwell (2017) discussed the four key elements defining
inclusion in public schools set forth by previous scholars in the field to best articulate the
inclusion experience;

   a) educating in settings typical of same-age peers; b) educating with peers who do not
   have disabilities during instructional time; c) providing supports, modifications, and
   services in general education settings; and d) creating environments in which all students
   experience belonging, acceptance, membership, and value. (p. 84)

   It is the expectation from the federal mandates set forward in the IDEA that students with
disabilities will be educated in the general education setting alongside their peers to the
maximum extent possible (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). However, if the IEP team determines that the
student cannot be successful in the general education classroom, despite the use of appropriate
supplemental aides and services, placement options are offered on a continuum and agreed upon
by the IEP team members in order to ensure placement in the least restrictive environment for
each individual student (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

   Despite this call for educational services for students with disabilities to occur in the
general education classroom, it is painstakingly clear in the literature that students with ID
continue to be educated in separate classrooms, away from their general education peers (Asmus et al., 2017; Brock, 2018; Giangreco, 2017; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). In a synthesis of data, Brock (2018) found minimal progress toward inclusion over the past 40 years. His findings asserted that most students with ID continue to receive services in restrictive environments. Data presented from Wehmeyer et al. (2021) also found minimal progress in terms of percentages of students with disabilities being served in the general education setting from 1995 to 2017 and that students with ID primarily receive services in segregated, self-contained settings (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by Ryndak et al. (2014), the reasoning for restrictive placements of students with significant disabilities outside of the general education classroom could be the extensive support the students require. The study explored key concepts related to inclusive education and the potential needs for services outside of the general education classroom. This is presented as a counter-argument to full inclusion in the literature, described as presenting educational placement on a continuum of options to include separate academic classes for individuals with disabilities. Research supporting this model explains the need for alternative placement options in order to meet the specialized needs of students with significant disabilities (Kurth et al., 2014; Mayton et al., 2014). This stance highlights the specialized training and differentiation that can be provided in a special education setting. Placement outside of the general education classroom was considered beneficial for a small population of students whose needs were highly specialized and could only be provided by designated trained staff (Kurth et al., 2014).

Proponents of the full inclusion model cite the benefits to include increased academic performance, an improvement in social skill developments, an increase in communication skills
and feelings of acceptance by the individual with a disability (Argan et al., 2020; Kleinert et al., 2015; Stiefel et al., 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Those advocating for full inclusion believe that this setting provides the best educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities and is mutually beneficial for peers without disabilities (Kleinert et al., 2015).

Regardless of stance on full inclusion or a continuum of services, key stakeholders in the field must continue to strive for better social inclusion to continue improving the lives of individuals with disabilities. A clear step to initiating social interaction is placing students in the same classroom. Rosetti (2018) reported that inclusive education settings were “critical contexts for friendship development because, like all students, students with severe disabilities tend to become friends with those they see frequently (i.e., proximity) and those with whom they share interests and experiences (i.e., similarity)” (p. 13).

**Social Inclusion**

While federal mandates such as IDEA have helped improve the physical inclusion of students with disabilities in public school systems across the country, a fundamental shift is needed in order to shift the focus now to the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Social inclusion goes beyond the physical inclusion of people with disabilities, and instead refers to relationships, a sense of belonging, and membership in a community (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Hymel & Katz, 2019). A review of the literature reveals individuals with disabilities remain socially isolated from their peers (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Pallisera et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018).

In an effort to advance policy and practice in the field, improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities, and strengthen communities, a team of stakeholders convened at the National Goals 2015 Conference and developed six national research goals to promote better
social inclusion in the next ten years. Key components of the goals set forth were to develop measures for social inclusion, examine how personal and community contexts shape inclusion, embed measures of inclusion in research about other life domains, build capacity for social inclusion, identify best practices for promoting inclusion from the community perspective, and lastly, to understand life course trajectories that impact inclusion (Bogenschutz et al., 2015).

A correlation between social inclusion for individuals with disabilities and a better quality of life has been discovered (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). Research indicated that the existence of friendships for individuals with disabilities made them five times more likely to participate in the community (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). The research also shows that in order for social inclusion to occur, the implementation of programs aimed at targeting interactions between students with disabilities and nondisabled peers is required (Magnusson et al., 2016). This is an important piece of information that further substantiates evidence in the literature supporting the value of schools and other organizations facilitating social inclusion (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Hymel & Katz, 2019). Results of achieving social inclusion for all would be reciprocal for both the individuals with disabilities and our communities as a whole (Bogenschutz et al., 2015).

Post-Secondary Outcomes

When looking at the common characteristics of individuals with intellectual disabilities and the specific areas of limitation, it is abundantly clear that adequate planning for post-secondary life is imperative. The transition into adulthood for this population of individuals is often riddled with hardships and uncertainty (Perez & Crowe, 2021). In an effort to alleviate such a steep drop-off in support and services when exiting high school for this population of students, IDEA (1990) began requiring Transition Service Plans for any student receiving special
education services beginning at the age of 16. Some states, such as Virginia, require IEP teams to begin transition planning by the age of 14.

The goal of transition planning is to provide an avenue for parents, teachers, students and other key stakeholders to actively plan for a student’s postsecondary school life. The 2004 re-authorized IDEA (2004) defines transition services as,

a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that are (a) designed to be a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation, and (b) based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests. (Sec. 1401)

Proper transition planning should include IEP goals linked to postsecondary outcomes that are based on the personalized strengths and interests of the student. The planning process should involve all members of the IEP team, parents, as well as the student. Transition planning must have the end goal in mind and work backward to ensure a seamless transition into postsecondary life (Snell-Rod et al., 2020). Snell-Rod et al. (2020) identified key flaws in transition planning to include inappropriate goal setting, ineffective communication between the IEP team and other key stakeholders, and inadequate involvement by team members throughout the planning process.

One way to combat these common flaws is by implementing Person Centered Planning. Person Centered Planning (PCP) puts individuals with disabilities at the center of support planning and focuses on how the individual wishes to live their life and what is needed to make
that possible (McCausland et al., 2021). Effective use of PCP has been identified as having the potential to facilitate improved social inclusion and community participation for individuals with disabilities (Claes et al., 2010; McCausland et al., 2021). For individuals with significant disabilities, it is imperative to seek parent and family involvement in order to achieve this. Research presented by Perez and Crowe (2021) found that by focusing specifically on the individual student and seeking family involvement “allowed a better understanding and targeting of the needs of the participant based on the sociocultural context in which they live, including their individual and family-based leisure interests, and their access (or lack of) to programs and resources” (p.12). Transition planning should be an extremely individualized process that requires family involvement to be successful.

Currently, the postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities have proven to be lower than their peers (Test et al., 2009, 2018). According to data published by the National Longitudinal Transition Study, individuals with disabilities are less likely to enroll in some type of postsecondary education or training program, live independently, or have financial stability (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Test et al. (2018) identify the following predictors for a successful postschool transition; career awareness, community experiences, exit exam requirements and diploma, inclusion in general education, interagency collaboration, occupational courses, paid employment, parental involvement program of study, self-care, and independent living skills, and self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

Mazzotti et al. (2016) further expanded the predictors of post-school success identified by Test et al. (2009) to include parent expectations, youth autonomy, and decision-making, travel skills, and goal setting. It is important to note that the implications for practice for both studies were to allow key stakeholders to use the indicators for post-school success that they identified
to better shape and develop the transition plans and services for students with disabilities. Doing so helps ensure that schools implement effective transition plans that are research-based and linked in the literature to positive outcomes for students (Mazzotti et al., 2016).

Scheef et al. (2019) also cited the school-related factors identified by Test et al. (2009), but focused specifically on the impact of peer support arrangements promoting positive post-school outcomes. Scheef et al. (2019) found that in addition to the myriad of benefits well documented in the literature for implementing peer support arrangements (Carter et al., 2018), this strategy can be especially effective at promoting positive post-school outcomes for individuals with disabilities. This study involved a well-established peer mentor program that successfully supported students with disabilities in a high school setting in the Northwest. A powerful finding in this study was that fostering lasting relationships between peers and students with disabilities can go well beyond the school and could ultimately increase an individual’s lifelong access to the community in which they live (Scheef et al., 2019).

Interactions with peers have been proven to offer a rich context for the acquisition of new skills, provide access to natural supports, and promote growth and learning (Wehmeyer et al., 2016). This research further substantiates the importance of social engagement with peers and how the effects of these relationships formed through peer support programs can have lasting effects on the life of individuals with disabilities (Scheef et al., 2019).

Moving forward, it is important for key stakeholders to use research-based methods to help develop and implement transition service plans for students with disabilities. The literature points to the most vital components of a transition service plan to include: a highly qualified staff, instruction in all areas of independent living, individualized transition-focused curriculum, instruction and training in the natural environment (community job sites), opportunities to
engages and interacts with nondisabled peers, interagency collaboration to provide a coordinated transition at multiple levels, multiple methods of progress monitoring and assessment, encouragement of parental and family involvement through support and resources, and overall program evaluations to assess effectiveness (Rowe et al., 2015).

In an effort to streamline the transition process nationwide, a group of researchers developed a Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler et al., 2016). This was designed to enhance the post-secondary lives of individuals with disabilities. This Taxonomy for Transition Planning incorporates the latest research regarding post-secondary success and strives for service systems and programs to connect in order to enhance the implementation and learning for individuals with disabilities (Cumming et al., 2020; Kohler et al., 2016). The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 has five core pillars: family engagement, program structures, interagency collaboration, student development, and student-focused planning (Kohler et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that focusing on these five core areas will enhance the transition for individuals with disabilities into postsecondary life (Kohler et al., 2016).

**Friendship**

Forming and developing friendships is proven to be a key indicator of an individual’s quality of life and overall well-being (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Hymel & Katz; 2019; Rosetti 2011, 2018; Schaefer et al., 2018; Ziegler, 2020). Human belonging is considered a fundamental human motivation, and research shows that people innately have a longing to form social attachments with one another (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Recent literature finds that individuals with disabilities were rated on parental surveys as having a lower quality of life than compared to their typically developing peers (Ncube et al., 2018). In a study conducted by Friedman and Rizzolo (2017), the link between friendship and quality of life was examined for
individuals with intellectual disabilities. Study results indicated the existence of friendships improved almost every aspect of one’s life. This study underscores the value of creating opportunities for individuals with disabilities to create and maintain friendships, especially as they reach adulthood.

Just as non-disabled peers struggle to form and maintain these social connections and friendships, so do students with disabilities, only at a magnified level. The National Longitudinal Transition Study focused on surveying the social activities of youths with disabilities found that fewer than 25% of students with disabilities spent time with friends outside of school (Wagner et al., 2004). Students with disabilities frequently report lower quality friendships, and feelings of isolation and loneliness (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Palliser et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018).

A survey of parents of students with significant disabilities reported that what they wanted most out of schooling was for their children to develop friendships and interact socially with their peers in and out of school (Overton & Rausch, 2002). Unfortunately, a multitude of barriers exists that prevent students with disabilities from forming friendships with their peers. Daughrity (2019) interviewed parents to discuss barriers to friendship development for their child with a disability and the difficulties parents face when attempting to facilitate these friendships. Several parents mentioned social skills and communication deficits as inhibiting their child’s interaction. For example, difficulty maintaining eye contact, poor conversation skills, or the use of noncontingent utterances impeded their ability to engage with their peers. Similar results were reported by Asmus et al. (2017), confirming the social skill deficits and communication challenges served as barriers to interaction with peers, but additionally highlighted a lack of opportunity for interaction to occur as a key barrier to friendship.
In a unique perspective, Garolera et al. (2021) described the barriers and supports to friendship identified by 11 young adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. Through interviews, it was discovered that segregated schooling (in a special classroom), negative experiences with classmates or social isolation, losing contact with friends, and lack of social or communication skills were identified as barriers to friendship with peers. Another study sought the perspective of peers who frequently interacted with students with complex communication needs (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020). Interviews revealed that friendships between students with disabilities and nondisabled peers do exist, even if they may look different from “typical” friendships (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018). Results underscored the need for school environments to purposely create and support opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with their peers (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020). Support for these interactions is key to not only this research study, but for future research as well.

Lastly, nondisabled peers lacking the information and/or skills necessary to successfully interact with students with disabilities presents another barrier. Leigers et al. (2017) pinpoint possible barriers to friendship for students with disabilities to be a lack of inclusion in academic classes, peers lacking information needed to interact with them comfortably, and social skill deficits. One way to alleviate these barriers to friendship is by improving disability awareness by addressing this “peer-related issue” in an informative way to the non-disabled peers. Acknowledging the varying barriers that exist can allow key stakeholders to address them and make necessary systematic changes.

**Disability Awareness**

Disability awareness is defined as "educating people regarding disabilities and ensuring that individuals with disabilities have rights to lead their lives" (Chae et al., 2019, p. 2).
Negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities stem from a lack of knowledge about disability (Magnusson et al., 2017) and appear to be more prevalent in students at the high school level (Vasileiadis et al., 2021). Peers may feel that they lack the skills needed to interact with students with disabilities. Students need opportunities to learn about people with disabilities and the importance of social inclusion; disability awareness programs can provide just that (Magnusson et al., 2017).

Research strongly supports programs aimed at improving perceptions and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in order to encourage true social inclusion (Magnusson et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2021). A review of the literature revealed that disability awareness programs could take multiple approaches. One approach involves an instructional model where nondisabled peers attend sessions to learn about individuals with disabilities through a presentation, activities, handouts, or stories (Chae et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2017; Magnusson et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2021). Magnusson et al. (2017) provided examples of activities that could be facilitated during a training session aimed at broadening the mindset of nondisabled peers and exposing them to the challenges an individual with a disability could face in everyday life. These activities included preparing food using only one hand or with their eyes closed, playing games with crutches in a wheelchair, and writing with their non-dominant hand. Sessions also included video and textural components teaching students about various disabilities (Magnusson et al., 2017, p. 411).

Other disability awareness programs involve direct contact with individuals with disabilities, where participants learn through interaction. In a study conducted by Chae et al. (2019), it was found that direct contact-based programs aimed at improving disability awareness resulted in more positive attitudes and awareness in peers. The results of the study highlighted
the frequency of interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers as an integral factor in improving attitudes towards disability in general. "Students without disabilities who received disability awareness interventions showed a statistically significant improvement in disability awareness and attitudes towards disability compared to control groups" (Chae et al., 2019, p.12). This same notion was solidified in another study conducted by McManus et al. (2011) that found the quality of the interaction and experiences shared with individuals with disabilities had the most significant variance of impact on the overall attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Further, interventions with the greatest impact on attitude change facilitate social interactions using multiple strategies with direct unstructured contact and less adult guidance (McManus et al., 2021). This is important for future researchers to be aware of so that proper peer interactions can be facilitated to elicit the most promising social interactions between the two groups. Unlike other research in this area, this study found that the informal and unstructured contact between peers and students with disabilities provoked the greatest attitude change in the participants studied (McManus et al., 2021). Researchers attributed this to the opportunity for the students to naturally learn about “their common interests and humanity” (p.13).

Further study results concluded with others in the field that although the unstructured and informal contact was beneficial, the need for accompanying structured interactions remained vital (Chae et al., 2019; Hymel & Katz, 2019). Key stakeholders and special education teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating these quality social interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers. It is important for key stakeholders to recognize the
importance of providing opportunities to foster students’ disability awareness through contact-based experiences in natural settings (Chae et al., 2019).

**Facilitating Peer Interaction**

Simply stated by Hymel and Katz (2019), “inclusivity, not just proximity, is essential” (p. 8). Recent studies regarding inclusion show that merely putting students with disabilities in the same room as their non-disabled peers does not facilitate quality social interaction or development from either party involved (Brown, 2019; Chae et al., 2019, Magnusson et al., 2017; McDougall et al. 2004; Shalev et al., 2016; Sreckovic et al., 2017). The literature shows that true inclusion is not something that can be forced, but rather is fostered through the development of relationships and interactions (Scheef et al., 2019). In order for successful interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers to occur, a multitude of factors should be addressed.

The first step in encouraging interaction between peer groups is creating opportunities for interaction to occur. Research data shows that having students with disabilities included in the general education classroom does increase the likelihood of interaction (Chung et al., 2019). Chung et al. (2019) asserted that interactions among students with and without disabilities are more likely to flourish when students with IDD have access to the general education curriculum, work alongside their peers on the same or very similar assignments, and participate in shared activities and discussions. (p. 2)

Next, key stakeholders must recognize their role as facilitators of the interaction between the two groups. Purposeful designs for supported opportunities for interaction between students with disabilities and nondisabled peers is critical for better social inclusion to occur (Schaefer et
al., 2018) and quality friendships to develop (Rossetti & Keenan, 2018). Research pinpoints teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school leaders as the key individuals capable of facilitating meaningful interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers (Brown, 2019; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018; Sigstad, 2018; Ziegler et al., 2020). Sigstad (2018) reported, "Teachers have shown that they perform an essential role in contributing to the development of necessary skills and ensuring an optimal environment to foster peer interactions" (p. 13). Rossetti and Keenan (2018) further solidified the importance of educators and other adults, stating, direct support from adults was integral to the development of friendships between students with and without severe disabilities. They affirmed friendships as an educational goal and acted as facilitators, prompting social interactions and fading back to allow them to occur between the students. (p. 13)

Schaefer et al. (2018) introduced a purposeful design implementation plan for practitioners to use when planning for this successful interaction to occur between peers and students with significant disabilities. This plan consists of forming a multidisciplinary team, implementing peer-mediated interventions, and modifying the environment to create and improve contexts for interaction. Uniquely, this study presented a Comprehensive Social Inclusion Support Plan where the team systematically planned for interaction to occur on an individualized basis for students. This is an exceptional model that could genuinely evoke change in the social inclusion of students with disabilities if implemented properly in school systems nationwide.

As valuable as teacher and school personal support is, it is equally important for these individuals to recognize their roles in the facilitation in order to help, and not hinder the interaction between students with disabilities and their peers. Rossetti (2012) found that teachers
and other school personnel could inadvertently hinder peer interaction with students with disabilities. This study detailed the importance of the staff member recognizing their role as the facilitator and initiating a fade out of their support while enacting the support of peers. Similar findings were noted in a more recent study from Chung et al. (2019), where an increased level of adult support/proximity for the student with a disability correlated with a decreased frequency in peer interaction. This finding highlights the need for school personnel to be better aware of their role as facilitators of peer interaction and a need for more training of field personnel. Future research is needed to determine the best methods for achieving an adequate level of adult support without hampering peer interaction.

With the information presented in the literature substantiating the overwhelming benefits of peer interaction on improving the quality of life for students with disabilities (Carter, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016; Schaefer et al., 2018; Ziegler, 2020), it is vital that key stakeholders continue to look for successful programs to achieve this. An analysis of the research indicates robust findings that peer network programs are highly effective at achieving an increase in meaningful interaction between these groups.

Peer Networks

One research-based intervention that has been found to increase the interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers is the creation of peer networks or peer mentor programs in the school setting (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Carter, 2018; Herbert et al., 2020; Hochman et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2017; Ziegler et al., 2020). A peer network consists of a group of students paired with a student with a disability to form a network to promote social interactions throughout the school day during non-academic activities (Carter et al., 2013). Peer networks are built around unstructured social activities where
participants can naturally engage in rich opportunities for interaction such as lunch or before and
after school (Carter et al., 2013). This aspect of a peer network is especially important for the
high school level as the rigor of academic classes increases and opportunities to interact in the
classroom decrease. This is attributed to the increase in class sizes, more challenging curriculum,
and amplified focus on academic achievement at the high school level (Kuntz & Carter, 2019).

Peer networks have been found to increase social interactions between students with
disabilities and non-disabled peers as well as improve the social skill development and
communication efforts of students with disabilities (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter, 2018; Herbert et
al., 2020; Hochman et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2017). The unstructured
and social design of a peer network has shown to produce higher-quality interactions and levels
of acceptance versus studies where the peers take on an instructional role with the students with
disabilities (Marder et al., 2018; McManus et al., 2021). It is important to note that peer networks
require the involvement of staff members and other school personnel in order to increase
effectiveness. Staff members must recognize the role they play in initially setting up and
facilitating the interactions between the students with disabilities and their peers, and most
importantly, when to begin to fade their support so that natural social interactions can take place
with their peers (Ziegler et al., 2020).

Practitioners and key stakeholders should implement peer networks with research-based
methods in order to produce the best social inclusion outcomes. This research study will
implement a peer network program as described in the literature in order to further foster quality
social interactions between peers and students with disabilities at the high school level through
the implementation of the Best Buddies Club.

*Best Buddies Club*
An example of a successful peer network focused on the social inclusion of students with disabilities in their community that can be established in schools everywhere is Best Buddies. Best Buddies is the world’s largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Our programs empower the special abilities of people with IDD by helping them form meaningful friendships with their peers, secure successful jobs, live independently, improve public speaking, self-advocacy and communication skills, and feel valued by society. (Best Buddies International, 2021)

The Best Buddies program has local high school chapters designed for students with disabilities to spend time with their designated buddy during the school day, extracurricular events, and other social activities in the community. Established Best Buddies clubs in school systems nationwide have effectively increased the frequency of social interactions between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers (Marder et al., 2017). This study focused on one Best Buddies Club at a suburban high school that was already in place.

Key factors that differentiate the Best Buddies Club from other peer networks in the literature is that all interaction takes place in a social context. The non-disabled peer serves as a friend, not a teacher or academic partner. This has been cited in the literature as eliciting an increased level of social interaction, rather than pairing students with peers during academic instruction where the peer must take on an instructional role (Chae et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2018; McManus et al. 2021). This is attributed to the minimally structured social interactions during events that allow the non-disabled peers to learn about students with disabilities naturally through a shared social experience (Chae et al., 2019). Participation in the club is completely
voluntary and peer buddies are not rewarded or evaluated on their participation in the club in any way.

**Impact on Non-disabled Peers**

In recent years, many studies have demonstrated the overwhelmingly positive outcomes peer buddy programs can have on students with disabilities (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Carter, 2018; Herbert et al., 2020; Hochman et al., 2015; Marder et al., 2018; Schaefer et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2017; Ziegler et al., 2020), while very little literature is available to depict the benefits participating in these programs has on the non-disabled peers themselves. This study hopes to fill this gap in the literature by clearly depicting the viewpoint of the non-disabled peer buddy members who voluntarily participate at the high school level in the extracurricular Best Buddies Club. The hope is that by presenting the lived experience of the non-disabled peer, educators could entice greater participation from students as well as inspire school leaders to enact programs like the Best Buddies Club in their schools.

Of the research that is available, key areas of growth and impact have been expressed by nondisabled peers after interacting with individuals with disabilities. Nondisabled peers have expressed personal growth, the development of friendships, and an improved perception of individuals with disabilities (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2017). College-level participants expressed career development as a major outcome, stating that serving in a mentorship role to an individual with a disability guided or reassured them of their career path (Farley et al., 2014; Marder et al., 2017). In a qualitative study seeking the nondisabled peer’s perspective, Athamanah et al. (2020) found common themes among participants to include: mentors’ personal self-development, mentee growth, and
community benefits on campus (Athamanah et al., 2020). Participants noted that serving as a peer mentor,

built a positive self-identity, a discernible motivation on their academics, and solidified their career choice as well as improving patience, understanding, and awareness of individuals with IDD, the peer mentors reported having an increased sense of advocacy and civic engagement. (p.10)

Carter et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study on college students serving as peer mentors in hopes of identifying key motivating factors for serving as peer mentors to students with disabilities. The most common responses from the 250 students surveyed were the formation of friendships and personal growth as the main motivating factors for involvement in the program (Carter et al., 2019). This indicates that nondisabled peers are interested in pursuing these types of social interactions and friendships and solidifies the need for programs that can facilitate these connections. Key stakeholders must continue developing and implementing programs like this to “prepare the next generation of young people for future roles as neighbors, coworkers, and friends to their peers with disabilities” (Ziegler et al., 2020, p.9).

The related literature provides insight into why students are drawn to becoming peer mentors and provides insight into the benefits to the peer mentors at the college level. This study was conducted with hopes of finding similar results in the high school setting and to help fill the gap in the literature by describing the perspective of high school peer buddies and the impact social interaction with students with disabilities had on them.

One of the most cited researchers in the field of Special Education, Erik W. Carter (2018), wrote, "Although much is now known about the design and delivery of social-focused interventions, there is a continued need for research that expands the impact and reach of these
interventions” (p.7). This is precisely what was hoped to be contributed to the literature through the completion of this study.

Special Education Teacher Shortages

Throughout history, Special Education has experienced a shortage of teachers in the field (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Winzer, 2009). Beyond staffing shortages, Special Education also has the highest turnover rate among all educators (Gilmour & Wheby, 2020). These troublesome statistics should encourage key stakeholders to intervene in any way possible to alleviate this problem. One possible solution is implementing programs such as the one in this study, the Best Buddies Club, in order to expose non-disabled peers to the opportunity of working with individuals with disabilities in hopes of inspiring them down that career path.

In a study conducted by Marder et al. (2017), participants of a peer companion program noted that participation in the program guided them toward their career path. Similarly, findings from other studies in the field found that serving as a peer mentor to an individual with a disability opened participants’ minds to a different career path or helped them learn more about a field they were already considering (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014).

In a survey of college-level participants pursuing a degree in Special Education (Reeves et al., 2021), participants reported that experiences with students with disabilities “served as a catalyst for pursuing a career in Special Education” (p. 8). In fact, participants reported that these experiences with students with disabilities were key in helping them realize their career aspirations in Special Education, and prior to these interactions, they had never even considered this career path (Reeves et al., 2021). These findings could indicate that further implementation of programs like Best Buddies Club or other peer networks could result in more individuals
seeking employment working with individuals with disabilities. Implications of this could reduce the shortage of teachers in the field of Special Education.

**Summary**

Students with disabilities tend to lack the social skills necessary to create and maintain interactions with their peers. Although inclusion has become common practice in school systems across the country, students with significant disabilities continue to be socially isolated from their peers (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Pallisera et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018). Researchers have demonstrated the multitude of positive effects peer interaction has on the lives of students with disabilities (Carter, 2019; Rossetti & Keenan, 2019). Further analysis of research studies indicated the need for adequate facilitation of the interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers in order for the experience to be successful and positive for all parties involved. Key stakeholders in the school system and community help facilitate these relationships to bring about a sense of belonging and inclusion for all.

Researchers have also examined the impact of providing information to peers about disabilities in order to spread awareness through school intervention programs. Essential components of these programs include an instructional element where peers are taught about varying disabilities and frequently interact with students with disabilities (Chae et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2017; Magnusson et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2021). Other programs have developed from these informative intervention programs to spur the interaction between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, such as peer mentoring, peer networks, and peer buddy clubs. Non-disabled peers have dramatically enhanced the schooling experience and overall quality of life for students with significant disabilities (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter, 2018;
Herbert et al., 2020; Hochman et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2017).

However, little is known about the effect of such programs' participation on the peers themselves.

A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the impact social interactions with students with disabilities can have on non-disabled peers at the high school level. Further research is needed to pinpoint the true reach of the interventions and perhaps inspire others to facilitate these programs successfully to help improve the lives of students with disabilities and those without. By examining the peer and buddy relationships and analyzing the program's overall impact on the non-disabled peers, this study’s results could reveal an array of benefits for the nondisabled peers. These results could help school systems recognize the value in peer network programs and better prioritize them in their schools to bring about change for the students who need it most.

With a social constructivism approach and focus on the zone of proximal development, I hope to forge a study that not only helps improve the lives of students with disabilities, but fosters a sense of community and self-awakening within the general education peers. A study focused on the effects of a social constructivism approach conducted by Schreiber and Valle (2013) posited,

Perhaps the most important outcome of this pedagogy is that in working with others to accomplish a socially worthy goal, students are empowered, they learn about citizenship and building a better world, and they develop confidence for future group interactions.

(pp.14-15)

This quote perfectly solidifies this research study and the value this study’s results can bring to the literature.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experience of non-disabled peers who socially interact with students with disabilities through participation in the Best Buddies Club in the Georgetown School District. Data were collected through 1:1 interviews with the peers, the facilitation of focus group interviews, and written responses from each participant. In this chapter, the research design is identified, the research questions are presented, and the rationale for the selection of the setting and participants are described. The procedures for conducting the study are discussed, and my role as the researcher is described. Data collection and data analysis procedures are detailed. Trustworthiness is addressed to describe the steps taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research study.

Research Design

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p.3). This means that qualitative researcher’s study situations in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined four key characteristics of a qualitative study; “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive, and the product is richly descriptive” (p.15). Based on these criteria, this research study met the basic fundamental requirements of a qualitative research study as the purpose was to understand the perspective of non-disabled peers. This research study aimed to examine the social phenomenon
of interacting with individuals with disabilities in a social context as high school peer buddies in one specific setting.

A phenomenological design was selected for this research study as the goal of the study was to provide the perspective of nondisabled peers who had experienced the shared phenomenon of socially interacting with students with disabilities at the high school level. Phenomenological research was first introduced by Edmond Husserl, who is credited for pioneering this realm of philosophical thinking (Moustakas, 1994). The aim of phenomenological research is to determine what an experience means for the person who experienced it and to provide a comprehensive description of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Within phenomenology exists two differing approaches: Hermeneutic and Transcendental. A hermeneutic approach is rooted in interpretation and goes beyond the description of the phenomenon of study (Neubauer et al., 2019). A purely descriptive approach will be taken for this study, not an interpretive one; therefore, a transcendental phenomenological approach will be used.

The definition provided by Moustakas (1994), states that transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness. The goal is to “explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience” (p.49). This approach was chosen as opposed to a hermeneutic approach because the focus lies in describing the experience of the nondisabled peers as told by the participants, not interpreting their experience.

Moustakas (1994) outlined procedural steps in phenomenological research to begin with determining if the research problem can best be examined using a transcendental
phenomenological approach. In other words, is it a problem aimed at trying to understand a shared experience? The purpose of this research study was to describe the shared experience of peer buddies who interact socially with students with disabilities at the high school level as members of an extracurricular school club. Therefore, the research goals and questions were best addressed through a transcendental phenomenological approach in order to discover the shared phenomenon of serving as a high school peer buddy to students with disabilities at the high school level.

Within a transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher must engage in “disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). This is known as the epoche process or bracketing and is an imperative step in order for the researcher to remove any bias related to the study. For this study, I used journaling to identify possible prejudgments related to the phenomenon. I wrote down any of my own biases so that I could clearly bracket those out and give a clear picture of the participants’ experiences.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of non-disabled peers socially interacting with students with disabilities at the high school level. To better understand this phenomenon, one central research question and two sub-questions were developed.

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of high school non-disabled students who socially interact with peers with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?”

**Sub Question One**
How does interacting socially with peers with disabilities impact the non-disabled student’s perception of people with disabilities?

**Sub Question Two**

How does frequent interaction with their peers with disabilities help non-disabled students recognize and overcome barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities?

**Setting and Participants**

In order to adequately address the research questions posed in this study, both the sites and participant selection were key components of conducting a successful research study. Below, the sites and participants selected in this study are described in detail and a rationale for their selection is given.

**Sites**

The setting for this transcendental phenomenological study was Georgetown Public School District (pseudonym), a large suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. This school district was composed of twenty-five high schools and was considered the largest school system in the state. Three High Schools within this school system were selected for this study based on having active Best Buddies Clubs and showing a willingness to participate.

According to Georgia School Reports, the first school, Creekside High School, served roughly 3,710 students. Of these students, 53% were Caucasian, 19% were African American, 15% were Hispanic, 9% were Asian, and 4% multiracial. At Creekside High school, roughly 13% of the students received some form of special education services. These services could include self-contained, resource, co-taught, or related services such as speech or occupational therapy. Creekside High School was composed of 191 staff members led by a principal, an associate principal, and ten administrators.
The second site, Harrison High School, served roughly 2,946 students. Of these students, 48% were Hispanic, 28% were African American, 14% were Caucasian, 7% were Asian, 2% were multiracial, and 1% were considered “other.” At Harrison High School, roughly 10% of their student population received some form of special education service. Harrison High School employed 164 staff members and was led by a principal and ten administrators.

Site number three, Brookstone High School, served roughly 3,023 students. Of these students, 30% were Hispanic, 29% were African American, 23% were Caucasian, 13% were Asian, 4% were multiracial, and 1% were considered “other.” At Brookstone High School, roughly 13% of their student population received some form of special education service. There were 163 staff members at this site led by a principal and ten administrators.

These sites were selected due to having established Best Buddies Club programs and active participation by the student body in each school setting. Best Buddies Clubs are active throughout the school district, and these sites in particular have had active participation for several consecutive years. Participation in the club ranged from 30-65 members across the sites with the greatest participation shown at Creekside High School, but it is important to note that this site also had the largest population of students. These programs were each led by special education staff members and student-nominated leaders who served various leadership roles. Based on this information, these sites served as appropriate locations to address the research questions.

Participants

According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological study should include five to twenty-five participants who have all experienced the phenomenon of study. For this study, the number of participants were determined based on data saturation towards describing the phenomenon. A
total of 14 participants were selected in order to obtain substantial in-depth descriptions from the participants towards the phenomenon of study.

The participants in this study were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure participation of individuals who were not only willing to provide their perspective, but participants who had developed rich experiences of the phenomenon through active participation in the club (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is preferred for qualitative research in order to ensure the selection of participants who have rich experiences of the phenomenon of study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

This study included 13 female participants and one male participant ranging from 15 to 18 years old. Seven of the participants were from Creekside High School, four from Brookstone High School, and three from Harrison High School. Participants came from various backgrounds and had varying levels of experience interacting with individuals with disabilities.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
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<th>Pseudonym:</th>
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<th>Ethnicity</th>
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Researcher Positionality

My personal beliefs and professional experiences drove my motivation for conducting this study. Below, the interpretive framework employed in this study is described. My philosophical assumptions are outlined for a better understanding of my own positionality as it pertains to this research study.

Interpretive Framework

The social constructivist interpretive framework, where individuals attribute multiple meanings to the same lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018), helped shape this study in hopes of finding solutions to better include students with disabilities socially with their peers. By understanding the multiple experiences that created quality social interactions between students with disabilities and their peers, key stakeholders can continue to facilitate such events in school systems nationwide.

Philosophical Assumptions

Below, I articulate my positionality on pertinent philosophical assumptions in order to provide an understanding of the lens through which I view the world and how I approached this research. The three philosophical assumptions addressed are ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

Ontological Assumption

As a qualitative researcher, I embraced the ontological assumption of multiple realities in order to accurately report the varying perspectives of my participants. In this research study, I was seeking the perspectives of multiple individuals and I was prepared to accept their differing views on their experience. This was done through the use of multiple forms of evidence and using the verbatim words from different participants, thus presenting the same shared
phenomenon from varying perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

**Epistemological Assumption**

In order to conduct this phenomenology study, I, as the researcher, had to recognize that the knowledge gained in this study came from the participants and their individual views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, subjective evidence is obtained from the participants. Epistemological assumption refers to what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are made, and what the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher is (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants in this study were all studied in their school environment in order to best understand the context of the participants’ views. As the researcher, I recognized that I work in the same field and observed and interacted with the participants as frequently as possible in order to best relate to their own individual perspectives and lessen the distance between myself as the researcher and the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Axiological Assumption**

As a qualitative researcher, I must make my personal values known as they relate to this study. I am a passionate advocate for individuals with disabilities and have spent the past decade of my life trying to make those around me more accepting and inclusive of my students with disabilities. I have taught self-contained special education for eleven years now and have developed a deep connection with not only my students, but their families as well. I believe that individuals become better versions of themselves after spending time with individuals with significant disabilities. These are my own axiological assumptions that I bring to this research study.

**Researcher’s Role**
I served as the human instrument in this transcendental phenomenological study. I am a special education teacher for students with low incidence disabilities. I was not the teacher of any of the participants involved in this study and did not serve in an authoritative position over them. All members of the Best Buddies Club were voluntary members who did not receive a grade, or any type of evaluation based on their participation in this extra-curricular club. My role as the researcher was to examine the interactions that occurred between the non-disabled peers and the students with disabilities and inquire through interviews and focus groups as to how this interaction affected the non-disabled peer. Any personal bias or assumptions were addressed through the epoche and bracketing process. As the researcher, my role was to describe the shared experience of the participants in this phenomenological study.

**Procedures**

Prior to conducting this research study, proper permissions were received by the Institutional Review Board, research sites, participants, and the participants’ parents (if under the age of 18). Below, the procedures for securing such permission and carrying out the data collection process for this study are detailed.

**Permissions**

Approval from the IRB to conduct the study was obtained (Appendix A). Approval was granted from the school system to conduct the research study at multiple High Schools in the district (See Appendix B). For participants 18 years of age, a consent form was signed (Appendix D), and for participants under the age of 18, informed consent was signed that also included signed consent from their parents (Appendix E).

**Recruitment Plan**

All members of the Best Buddies Club were asked if they are willing to participate in the
study via a recruitment email found in Appendix C. Out of those who responded “yes” to the email, a purposeful sampling procedure was used in order to select participants with maximum variation in terms of personal demographics and characteristics, who had each vividly experienced the phenomenon of study (Mason, 2010). This ensured the best data was given to answer the research questions at hand and allow for appropriate dialogue to occur in the focus groups administered. The participant sample size was based on the data collected. A total of 14 participants were used to achieve saturation where no further data collection was necessary to adequately describe the phenomenon being studied (Mason, 2010).

**Data Collection Plan**

This study used standard qualitative research data collection methods. In order to provide reliable and trustworthy research findings, triangulation of multiple data collections methods was used. As this phenomenological study aimed to understand the shared experience of non-disabled peer buddies serving in the Best Buddies club, the researcher conducted 1:1 interviews with each participant, held two focus group interviews with seven participants in each, and obtained written responses from each participant.

**Individual Interviews**

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) described the qualitative interview as “a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world. It provides unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions” (p.10). In this study, interviews were used to gain the perspective of the non-disabled peer buddy and develop clear descriptions of how participation in the Best Buddies Club has affected them. The interview procedures outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) were used in this study to ensure consistency across interviews and allow for proper analysis.
upon completion of the interviews. The procedures for preparing and conducting interviews were as follows:

Creswell and Poth (2018) state the first step is to develop the research questions to be used for the interviews that are clearly focused on understanding the phenomenon being studied. For this study, each question was developed to elicit a personal response from the non-disabled peer buddy and a purposefully written self-reflection by the participant. The next step in the protocol outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) is to select the interviewees who can best answer these questions. For this study, the participants were all selected from the Best Buddies Clubs in the Georgetown School District. Next, the researcher must select the type of interview that is the most appropriate mode for practicality and usefulness in the study. In this study, interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Zoom, depending on the participant’s site location. The next step would be to collect data using adequate recording procedures, meaning record all interviews for proper transcription upon completion. An interview protocol was developed with 14 open-ended questions. Next, I selected a distraction-free location for holding the interviews. I engaged in good interview etiquette throughout the process, such as adhering to the time allotted, following the interview protocol, and being respectful to the participants. Lastly, I determined transcription logistics and plans prior to the interview occurring. For this study, all interviews were recorded using Zoom audio recording and transcribed using the NVivo Transcription software. This ensured proper analysis could occur upon completion of the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.165-166).

Prior to the interview, each participant filled out a short questionnaire (located in Appendix F) to provide their demographic information (race, age, gender, grade). The interview took place in person between the researcher and participant or virtually using the video
conferencing platform Zoom. The 1:1 interview protocol can be found in Appendix G. The questions below directly relate to the research questions of this study and hope to elicit a multitude of responses from the participants.

**Individual Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (how would your family/friends describe you?)

2. What made you want to join Best Buddies Club? (CRQ)

3. Describe your experience serving as a Best Buddy this school year. (CRQ)

4. Describe your buddy (student with a disability). (SQ1)

5. What do you wish all people knew or understood about your buddy? (SQ1)

6. What was your favorite experience you shared with your buddy this year, and why? (SQ1)

7. What, if anything, challenged you while serving as a buddy? How did you or are you overcoming this challenge? (CRQ)

8. What have you learned about yourself while serving as a buddy? Please explain the situation that prompted you to recognize this. (SQ2)

9. How, if at all, has your opinion about people with disabilities changed? Please provide me a specific example of an experience that caused you to change your point of view. (SQ1)

10. What are you most proud of after serving as a buddy this year and why? (CRQ)

11. How did you overcome social interaction barriers with your buddy? (SQ2)

12. Have your professional and future goals for yourself changed at all after serving as a best buddy? (SQ1)

13. How, if at all, does this experience serving as a buddy impact your thoughts about what
you want to do beyond high school? (SQ1)

14. Is there anything else you’d like to share about this topic?

Each question in this interview protocol was carefully crafted using the parameters outlined by Brinkmann & Kvale (2018). The interview began with two introductory questions to first elicit the participant's personality and traits, and second, to articulate their personal motivation for joining the Best Buddies Club. Introductory questions hope to “yield spontaneous, rich descriptions where the subjects themselves provide what they experience as the main aspects of the phenomenon investigated” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 67). Question one and two gave the participant a chance to express a bit about themselves and their personal motivations for joining the club.

Question three was posed as a reflective opportunity for the participants to describe their experience of the phenomenon of study, serving as a buddy to a student with a disability. Question four was an opportunity for the participant to describe their buddy and provide insight in how they viewed individuals with disabilities after serving in the buddy role. Question five and six were asked in order to hear from the participants in their own words on what they wished other people knew about their buddy and to describe the shared experiences they had together. These probing questions allowed the participant to say as much or as little about their buddy. The answer to these questions expressed the level of friendship attained through participation in the Best Buddies club. The answer to question six retold a shared experience with their buddy and provided insight on effective social scenarios that elicited positive interaction between the peer buddies and students with disabilities.

Questions seven and eight were reflective questions where the participant was asked to think more deeply about their own personal growth and express how they had grown while serving as
a peer buddy. These questions, in particular, reflect the purpose of the interview study. This question was asked to obtain descriptions from the participant that had relevant and reliable material (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) pertaining to this study.

Question nine, a ‘how’ question, was asked to “promote positive interaction, keep the flow of the conversation going, and stimulate the subjects to talk about their experiences and feelings” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p.65). This question allowed the participant to reflect on any preconceived notions they may have had about individuals with disabilities and how their opinions may have changed after serving in this role. Question ten also asked the participant to reflect on their experience and pinpoint what they were most proud of. This type of self-reflection allowed the participant to see value in the work they had done as a peer buddy and take a moment to articulate the work they had done to help their buddy.

Question eleven asked the participants to discuss barriers to social interactions with students with disabilities. This question was important for the research study to determine barriers to social interaction with individuals with disabilities. This question was important for this research study as it contributed thematically to the research study at hand (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) and could provide valuable insight for future implementation of clubs and activities like this one.

The interview wrapped up with questions twelve and thirteen, where the researcher asked the participants to think about the future. Question twelve allowed the participant to think about their own goals for the future and any skills they possibly acquired in their role as a buddy, while question thirteen asked the participant if they planned to continue this type of interaction with this population of individuals in the future. The concluding question simply asked if there was anything else the participant would like to share before concluding the interview.
Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

This research study followed the data analysis procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) to begin with the epoche process prior to collecting data in order for the researcher to set aside any prejudgments regarding the phenomenon. Next was phenomenological reduction, where all of the data collected was reviewed for relevant statements. Lastly was imaginative variation, where data was clustered into underlying themes in order to describe the essence of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche

Before research results can be analyzed, full participation in the epoche process is required. Epoche refers to the researcher engaging in “disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomena being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p.22). “Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (p.33). Epoche is further described as a “clearing of the mind” for the researcher to position themself in a receptive space where they are ready to embrace new ideas without imposing prejudgment (Moustakas, 1994). Through proper facilitation of this process, the researcher can approach this study in a way that can clearly describe the shared phenomenon as reported by the participants themselves. For this study, journaling was used in order to bracket out any bias or opinions I had pertaining to the subject matter. Field notes were taken during the data collection process (see Appendix K for an example) and analysis segments of the research process to ensure each participant's voice and perspective remained the focus of the study.
**Phenomenological Reduction**

Upon completion of the epoche process, I engaged in the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction. Moustakas (1994) describes this as driving a “textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (p. 34). Moustakas outlines the steps of the Phenomenological Reduction to begin with bracketing, where the focus of the research is placed in brackets, to keep the focus of the research process on the topic and research question. Next was horizontalization, where every statement initially has equal value and later any duplicate topics are deleted leaving the horizons of the phenomenon. Lastly, the horizons are classified into themes and clear structural and textural descriptions are made (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) describes this process by stating,

> Each experience is considered in its singularity, and for itself. Within the brackets, the phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way, a graded series of reductions coming from a transcendental state, a total differentiated description of the most essential constituents of the phenomenon. (pp. 96-97)

For this research study, all verbatim transcripts from each interview, focus group, and written letter component were imported into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. All data was coded. Each statement was further solidified for relevance, clarity, and necessary for understanding the phenomenon of study (see Appendix L for a sample theme development log). Statements that were not pertinent, redundant, or too vague were deleted. This left only the horizons of the study at hand, and core themes were developed. From the themes identified, I constructed the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon of study. Textural descriptions include feelings and verbatim examples from participants related to the experience,
while structural descriptions provide a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

**Imaginative Variation**

Next, I completed the Imaginative Variation stage, aimed at discovering the structural essence of the shared experience of the non-disabled peer buddies (Moustakas, 1994). This process is described as seeking “possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98). The main goal of this was to attempt to describe how the experience of the phenomenon came to be what it was.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups provide an opportunity for the researcher to interact with multiple participants at the same time. Focus groups allow the participants to generate and share ideas related to the phenomenon of study in a group forum that allows them to establish the relevance of the phenomenon to them specifically (Breen, 2006).

Two focus groups were held with seven participants in each one. For data triangulation, each participant participated in one of the focus group sessions. The first focus group was held in person at the site location in a private meeting room, free of distractions. The second focus group was held virtually via the video conferencing software, Zoom. Unlike the 1:1 interview conducted previously, topics were brought up from the focus group protocol as guiding questions, and natural conversation took place among the focus group participants. The goal of a focus group is that “the lively collective interaction may bring forth more spontaneous expressive and emotional views than in individual, often more cognitive interviews” (Brinkmann
The questions for the focus group were drafted after initial data analysis of the 1:1 interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to delve deeper into the phenomenon of study; therefore, the focus group questions were refined after the 1:1 interviews had occurred and the emerging commonalities among the participants were pinpointed. The following six conversation probes were used to guide the focus group conversation. The goal of the focus group was not to form consenting viewpoints or solutions, but rather to provide a forum where different opinions and experiences could be shared (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The focus group protocol used can be found in Appendix H. Each one of the probes aimed to start the conversation with the participants and let it naturally evolve as it related to them personally.

**Focus Group Questions**

1. Describe how you have grown as an individual through serving as a “best buddy.”
   (CRQ & SQ1)

2. What was your most impactful memory from this school year with your buddy?
   (CRQ)

3. What do you think is this biggest misconception about people with disabilities? Has your opinion about people with disabilities changed at all over this year? (SQ1)

4. Do you plan to continue to interact with people with disabilities in the future and in what capacity (either through Best Buddies Club again or a similar program in college)? (SQ1)

5. What recommendations do you have for ways to improve the Best Buddies Club program?

6. What would you do differently if you were in charge of the club? Are there better
ways to include students with disabilities in our school?

**Focus Group Data Analysis Plan**

Upon completion of the focus group interviews, verbatim transcriptions were made and imported into the NVivo software. The transcripts underwent the same data analysis procedures as the transcripts from the 1:1 interviews.

Specifically, the verbatim transcripts were imported to NVivo and coded. Each statement was further solidified for relevance, clarity, and necessary for understanding the phenomenon of study. Statements that were not pertinent, redundant, or too vague were deleted. From the themes highlighted, additional textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon of study were constructed. These units were then clustered into common themes (Moustakas, 1994). These clustered themes were used to develop the textural descriptions of the experience, and eventually the essence of the phenomenon was developed. I concluded with the imaginative variation procedures in order to arrive at the true essence of the experience of a nondisabled peer socially interacting with a student with a disability.

**Letter Writing**

The final data collection measure in this study was a written letter submitted by each participant. After participating in both a 1:1 interview and focus group interview, the participants were emailed the following writing prompt (Appendix I), and their response was emailed back to me:

Now that you have been a member of the Best Buddies Club, I would like you to think about ways to invite other peers to join as well. Please respond to the following prompt with 4-5 sentences.

“What would you say to recruit people to join this club next year?” Imagine your
statement being read on the school announcements to entice people to sign up for the Best Buddies Club.

**Letter Writing Data Analysis Plan**

This data collection method allowed the participants time to reflect on their experience serving as a peer buddy to a student with a disability and time to compose their response accordingly. The responses to the writing prompt reflected the impact and benefits participating in the club had on the nondisabled peers. The typed responses were imported into the NVivo software and underwent the same data analysis procedures as the verbatim transcripts from the interviews and focus groups. Significant statements were coded and those that were not pertinent, redundant, or too vague were deleted. From the themes highlighted, additional textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon of study were constructed.

**Data Synthesis**

The Qualitative Data Analysis Software, NVivo, was used to organize the data collected in this study and provide a means of coherent organization for the themes found throughout all data collection measures. NVivo allowed the researcher to manage data and organize it in a concise way in order to determine the underlying themes across data collection measures.

Through the triangulation of multiple data sources and undergoing the bracketing, horizontalization, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation processes, I arrived at the creation of textural and structural descriptions. The structural essence developed through the imaginative variation process was then merged with the textural essence derived from the transcendental phenomenological reduction process in order to compose a “textural-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 36).
The final step in the phenomenological research process was to develop a unified statement providing a synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I developed this through the integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). This resulted in a concise description of how the nondisabled peer participants experienced the phenomenon of serving as a best buddy to a student with a disability.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to establish trustworthiness for this research study, a multitude of measures were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability. In qualitative research, this is done by using a variety of data collection methods and providing rich descriptions of participant accounts.

**Credibility**

In order to establish the credibility of my data, I used triangulation of multiple data sources. As the researcher, I utilized multiple data sources to corroborate the underlying themes in my study (interviews, focus groups, and written letters). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe this as “the researcher makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (p. 260). This is an important validation strategy to ensure that the research is credible.

Another way to increase credibility for my research was by providing rich, thick descriptions. As explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), “to make sure that the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied, this description is necessary” (p. 256). This was provided through the transcription of interviews, analysis of data, and most
importantly, the development of the textural-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon as described by the research participants.

Lastly, I performed member checks to ensure proper transcription of the 1:1 interviews and focus group interviews had occurred. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as the most critical technique for establishing credibility. Member checks are defined as when “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (p. 314). All transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were presented back to each participant for review to ensure accurate data was depicted for their responses. All 14 participants verified the accuracy of their transcripts from their 1:1 interviews and their focus group interviews.

Transferability

In order to increase transferability in this study, I provided detail-rich textural and structural descriptions of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon of study. As the researcher, I interpreted how the participants in this study provided insight into the phenomenon and how it could be generalized to other cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I obtained maximum variation among program participants (ethnicity, grade level, experience level, etc.) in order to obtain a diverse set of responses and capture the true essence of the experience. The data collected from the research participants provided great insight into the effects of participation in Best Buddies Club at Creekside High School, Harrison High School, and Brookstone High School, but also in similar settings elsewhere.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved for this study through detailed descriptions of the procedures and methods used to conduct this study logged in the research journal. The documentation of
data analysis procedures for coding and the development of themes were presented in the Nvivo software, but also an example of theme development with codes can be found in Appendix L. This documentation of data analysis is presented to show how data was analyzed and constructed to develop the structural essence of the study. An inquiry audit occurred by the dissertation committee and Qualitative Research Director to ensure effective description of the procedures and data obtained for this study.

**Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe confirmability as a way to establish value to the data. This was done in my research study through member checking. The research participants verified that the information presented by the researcher was accurate and credible. One participant from each site read over the discussion portion of this study to verify that I captured the true essence of the phenomenon of study. By developing confirmability for my research study, I added another layer to ensuring that my research was trustworthy and credible. Appendix M is the research log for further confirmability of the research study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Addressing the ethical considerations for this study began by ensuring all necessary consent, assent, and approvals were received. Prior to conducting the study, parental consent was received by each participant who was under the age of 18. Student assent forms were distributed to each participant where information was presented clearly and in an age-appropriate manner, and signatures were obtained by those agreeing to participate. All participants were informed that their participation in this study was completely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any time. In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my participants, pseudonyms were used for all participants and the sites. Interviews took place in a private setting where
participants’ answers could not be easily overheard by others. All recorded interview sessions were saved on a password-protected computer. All written responses and printed materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a secure classroom. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

**Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of non-disabled peer buddies participating in the extracurricular Best Buddies Club focused on social interaction with students with disabilities. This chapter explained the methods and design of the study along with re-focusing the research questions that drove this study. The procedures for conducting the study were detailed, along with the data collection and analysis procedures that were used. My role as the researcher and positionality were also discussed. The chapter concluded with an outline of the efforts made to confirm trustworthiness and address any ethical concerns related to this study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experience of non-disabled peers who socially interacted with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club in suburban high schools. A total of 14 participants were selected to represent the perspective of non-disabled peers who interact with students with disabilities. This chapter introduces the study participants, presents the findings of the study, and the answers to the research question and sub questions. This chapter presents the data in the form of narrative themes, sub-themes, and research question responses.

Participants

This study included high school-aged non-disabled students who shared the common experience of being members of the extracurricular Best Buddies Club. This study consisted of 14 participants who met the research study criteria and expressed a willingness to participate. The participants all met the eligibility requirements of being high school students actively involved in a Best Buddies Club at their school. Participants included 13 female and one male participant ranging from 15 to 18 years old. Seven of the participants were from Creekside High School, four from Brookstone High School, and three were from Harrison High School. Participants came from various backgrounds and had varying levels of experience interacting with individuals with disabilities. Participants were assigned pseudonyms at random in accordance with their gender and cultural background to protect their identity. All 14 of the participants participated in the member checking process to confirm the accuracy of the verbatim transcripts from their 1:1 interviews. One participant from each location participated in member checking of the essence of the study to ensure an accurate picture was depicted of their
experience. Direct quotes were taken from the participants’ 1:1 interviews, focus group interviews, and individual written responses.

Emily

Emily was a fifteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the tenth grade at Creekside High School. She had previous knowledge about people with disabilities through her mother, who served as a school physical therapist for students with disabilities. This was her first year serving as a member of the Best Buddies Club. She described herself as outgoing, talkative, and friendly. She described her buddy as “sweet and a bit quiet, but once you get to know him, you can like, know what to say to make him laugh.” Emily reflected on her experience as a buddy this school year and described how she really had a false perception of people with disabilities, but through her participation in the club, she realized that people with disabilities were not that different from her. She summarized her participation in the club by saying, “I feel like it's a really great experience and I think everyone should partake in the club because it's really rewarding like everything you do. It feels like it really creates an impact for both parties.”

Shari

Shari was a seventeen-year-old, Asian female high school student in the twelfth grade at Creekside High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for three years and served as the Vice President of the Club at Creekside High School. She described herself as patient and outgoing. She discussed that her motivation for getting involved in the club stemmed from her brother's stuttering disorder. She said that after witnessing people treating him differently, she decided at that moment never to do that to another individual. She said,

So I promised myself in that day that no matter what it is, I won't judge anybody. And I personally will not stereotype anybody, regardless of someone's ability, race, gender,
ethnicity. That's not up to me to judge because personally, going through that situation, I wouldn't want anybody to feel how my little brother felt.

Shari was paired with a buddy with extremely limited verbal communication abilities. She described her buddy as bubbly, but hard to get to know. She described how she had worked hard to build a friendship with him over multiple years, and through frequent interaction, he had grown familiar with her. She used daily routines such as getting breakfast in the mornings at school as a way to build a connection with him.

**Gina**

Gina was a seventeen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the eleventh grade at Creekside High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for three years, and this year served in a leadership role in the club. She described herself as a very caring and social person who loves interacting with those around her. She was paired with a student with limited communication abilities and described this challenge as even more meaningful when she got a “hi” or a hug from him. She described her experience this year as “very rewarding” because she was able to hold a leadership role and interact with the students even more. She took it upon herself to visit the class of her buddy every school day instead of just during the club-assigned socials. She described how this allowed her to form connections with the entire class of students. She described this by saying,

> When you're with them every day, you get to see their true self, you can see the highs and the lows, and you get to just see the little… their habits and things that you know about them. And I can talk to them and ask them things, you get to know their personalities.

**Karly**
Karly was a sixteen-year-old, Native Hawaiian female high school student in the eleventh grade at Creekside High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for three years. She described herself as loud, outgoing, and hardworking. When describing her motivation for joining the club, she described hearing about a similar club at her middle school and said it looked like so much fun. She was paired with a buddy that had limited verbal abilities and engaged in frequent behavioral outbursts. She described the challenges she faced getting to know him and adjusting her expectations to meet her buddy at his comfort level. She stated how having a challenging buddy impacted her.

But I'm glad I did have him as a buddy because it helped me realize that not every kid with disabilities is the same. And so it's helping me go into like understanding how to help and talk to other buddies as I can with other kids with different disabilities.

Aliyah

Aliyah was a seventeen-year-old, African American female high school student in the twelfth grade at Creekside High School. This was her first year in Best Buddies Club and her first time interacting with students with disabilities in this capacity. She described herself as outgoing, positive, and supportive. She joined the club because her friend was involved in the club, and she tagged along to one meeting to see what it was all about. Uniquely, this participant discussed how she grew in the process of serving as a best buddy and found it important to pay it forward by bringing along a friend of her own who had never interacted with students with disabilities before. She described this during her interview,

I brought a friend with me. But it was her first time in there, in this hall. And she was just like, I feel like, I could see how her body was awkward. And I could see how she was like starring… And I was just like, she can gain more from joining best buddies club.
Like, that's how I was when I first came in. Look how much improved… I'm going to get her on the road. She's got to join this club! We have to make improvements. It's like we as a society it is all about pushing one another like to go and try this thing.

Kelly

Kelly was a sixteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the tenth grade at Creekside High School. This was her first year being a member of the Best Buddies Club. She described herself as a dancer (member of the high school dance team), patient, and outgoing. She joined the club because her older sister had been in it. She was paired with a buddy that was significantly disabled and non-verbal. She expressed how forming a connection with her buddy was initially very difficult for her. She was the only participant who described the efforts she made to learn how to better connect with her buddy, including researching and watching videos on the internet to teach herself how to interact with a student who was nonverbal. She also expressed how she really learned how to read and understand body language better. She described this by saying,

I learned to be more outgoing and to kind of like, understand people and definitely understanding body language because especially when she can't explain her feelings she can kind of show them. And I can tell when maybe she's getting nervous and I'm like, Okay well, I'll turn down my tone just a little bit less loud and things like, that's like understanding body language.

Ashley

Ashley was a fifteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the tenth grade at Creekside High School. This was her first year being a member of Best Buddies Club. She would describe herself as energetic, outgoing, and caring. Ashley had gained exposure to individuals
with disabilities by helping out with a Special Olympics event in Middle School. She said, “ever
since then, it's such an eye-opening experience to see through their eyes how they view the
world. It makes me want to be in the world that way.” She built a very strong connection with
her buddy this year and described him as a “ray of sunshine!” She described how she frequently
ate lunch with her buddy or planned to attend school events with him. She talked in detail about
her buddy suffering from a stuttering disorder and how through observation, she found ways to
help him feel more comfortable when speaking. She reflected on her experience as a buddy and
how she now felt a responsibility to stand up for all students with disabilities. She said,

I feel very more protective over them, and I feel as though it's not only my responsibility
to make sure other people don't say anything, but I call them out when they do say
something inappropriate or rude towards them.

Amy

Amy was an eighteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the twelfth grade
at Harrison High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for four years and
served as an executive member of the club at her school. She described herself as caring,
thoughtful, and social. She joined the club because several of her friends were already involved,
and it looked like fun. Amy was a varsity cheerleader at her school and helped facilitate a “Cheer
Night” for the girls in Best Buddies Club. She described this event as a true highlight of her time
in the club. They had the students with disabilities come to a few practices and really worked
with them, trying to teach them a cheer and how to do simple stunts. She described the event as
“so much fun, they had the time of their life.”

Rachel
Rachel was a seventeen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the twelfth grade at Harrison High School. Rachel had the most experience working with students with disabilities out of all of the participants, with over six years in the Best Buddies Club at her high school and a similar club during her middle school years. Rachel described herself as hardworking, caring, and patient. Rachel connected with a buddy she had known since the seventh grade. She described him by saying,

He is just like the sweetest person. I just love him because he's just so happy all the time. He brightens my mood and makes me so happy and like, I really look up to him because he's just always so positive about everything. And it's just so amazing to see that.

Her favorite memory from this school year was an interactive holiday-themed social filled with competitions and games. She described the fact that everyone was up and moving around and it made it very interactive and fun for everyone. This was a unique observation, as no other participants described how interactive activities elicited greater participation in the event.

Emory

Emory was an eighteen-year-old, Caucasian high school student from Harrison High School and the only male participant in the study. This was his first year joining Best Buddies Club, and he also held a leadership position as an executive member. He described himself as loud and social. He described joining the club because his friends suggested it as they were already members. Emory described how his usual circle of friends included extremely intelligent individuals and how this experience really taught him some valuable skills that he had not realized he needed. He stated,

Typically, I really only interact with people, I guess, at my school that are very intelligent, I'd say. I have trouble interacting with people that aren't as smart as others,
whether it be language or actions, like if somebody does something, I get a bad judgment of them. But now, after interacting with the buddies who they do things a lot differently than us, I've kind of been able to more understand, interact with all sorts of different people. Now it's easier.

Emory also uniquely chose an everyday interaction with a buddy that had started making him little cards and giving them to him as his highlight of the year. While most participants described a well-planned, special event, Emory reminisced on a small act of kindness shown by his buddy that really meant something to him.

Katy

Katy was an eighteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the twelfth grade at Brookstone High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for all four years of high school and served as the club president at Brookstone High School. She would describe herself as jovial, kind, laughs easily, and is easy to talk to. She described a buddy that she formed a connection with as really nice, talkative, loves to sing and do puzzles. Katy described how she really looked to the teachers and staff members to observe how they interacted with more significantly disabled students so she could learn.

I'm just talking to Ms. Smith and watching how she interacts with them. That helped me and I'm more comfortable around all of them now because, you know, sometimes they're touchy and they always want to talk and stuff. But I just don't just be it being around them more. I've gotten used to it. I just see how Ms. Smith interacts with them, and that's helped me kind of do the same.

Andrea
Andrea was an eighteen-year-old, Caucasian female high school student in the twelfth grade at Brookstone High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for all four years of high school. She described herself as shy until you get to know her, but then outgoing after time. She initially worked with children with disabilities with her mom at her church. After that experience, she found the Best Buddies Club at her school. She described forming a very close bond with a student she had known since middle school. This student even played on her youth basketball team with her. She said that their friendship was extremely special. They even had nicknames for each other and exchanged gifts on holidays.

Adrianna

Adrianna was an eighteen-year-old, Hispanic female high school student in the twelfth grade at Brookstone High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for four years. She described herself as caring, empathetic, and always tries to do her best. She was initially made aware of the club by a few of her friends in middle school who had told her how much fun it was.

This year I've really been given the opportunity to take charge of certain projects and just socials and parties. And that's been something really just gratifying for me and made me feel that I have a lot bigger part in everything. She mentioned how the friendships she had formed were really going to stay with her even after she graduates. She also discussed the opportunities she planned to pursue in college to interact with adults with disabilities.

Jada

Jada was an eighteen-year-old, African American female high school student in the twelfth grade at Brookstone High School. She had been a member of the Best Buddies Club for
three years. She described herself as outgoing, talkative, and likes to get to know different people. She described how she started helping in a Special Education classroom in middle school and how she really liked working with those students. That is what led to her joining the Best Buddies Club in high school. She described her friendship with a buddy and said she checked up on him outside of school and made sure he was doing okay in his classes.

**Results**

This study was driven by the central research question: What are the experiences of high school non-disabled students who socially interact with peers with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?” Purposeful sampling was used to elicit participation from members of the club who had rich experiences of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). The results of this study are presented following the data analysis process outlined by Moustakas (1994). After 1:1 interviews were conducted, two focus groups were held, and responses for the writing prompts were received; four primary themes with sub-themes emerged from the data analysis procedures.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes for all Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description of the Club</strong></td>
<td>I love that Best Buddies Club is just so welcoming. It is one of the most welcoming and open places you can be to meet new people and you'll get to know more about yourself and more people who just see the world so differently.</td>
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<td>I really like the club because it gives me something to look forward to. Like during school, I can be like oh, I'm going to go hang out with some of peers that may not be able to...But it has really helped me like see people who are different from me and learn from people that go to my school, and I kind of like a hands-on experience, so I feel like that really helps me in that aspect.</td>
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It's been the best club I think I've ever been in and I've been in so many clubs all my four years, and it's definitely been the club that has made the most impact on me. And it's just such an amazing club. I could be having a bad day and I go to the social after school. I just go in her classroom and I'm just like, my day is turned around and its just so much better.

And I'd say that they grow closer friendships than I have with regular students in my grade because they always come up to me and they know almost everything about me, and they're just more able to reach out to me than a lot of people are.

You're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment.

Make new friends with some of the schools best people and have lots of fun

I would say like patience because sometimes they don't always do what you ask them to do or like they won't, like, engage in some of the activities and you have to just like, keep trying and trying and just be patient with them.

I've learned that I'm more patient than I actually thought I was right.

Yes, it's only taught me to, like, be patient with others and like, everyone's going through something, even if you don't know it. But it's always good to be patient like that.

I think it's very useful to go into best buddies. It helps with planning skills and it helps with interacting with all sorts of people, which in the jobs that I am going into, consulting and real estate and marketing, even that be probably necessary in the workforce.

Yes, I definitely think I've learned to become a better communicator, and just like not, just communicate with people with disabilities. But like they all have different personalities and I definitely learned communicate with
like a lot different people, and I've become more confident with communicating with a lot of people.

Holding a conversation with them, like sometimes for my buddy will stutter, and he gets a little bit frustrated with it, but I try to understand and help him with it.

**New Perspective**

They've also taught me like a lot. Just kind of how to be positive is the most thing I've taken out from this because they're not in the best situation, but they're like the happiest and the most supportive people I've ever met.

I'm very close with them, and I just like interacting with them the same way I interact with everyone. And it's definitely changing that perspective.

They really widened my perspective in general, like just the people in the world.

**Challenges**

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<th>Pandemic</th>
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It has been harder with like COVID and stuff like that has like really like limited on what we can do.

More recently the pandemic, the buddies really like, they like having hugs and stuff like that, and so like making sure that they're safe as well. It's kind of like has like made it harder actually, like last year because last year we weren't at school at all.

I would say with Covid having to do the things on Zoom that was definitely challenging. It was much harder than being in person because you couldn't grow as close relationships with the buddies through a screen.

**Communication**

You kind of like have to learn to work around sometimes not being able to interact vocally with them.

I would say like trying to communicate with my buddy since it was so different, I've never experienced being with someone who wasn't able to verbalize. So it was learning his body language and learning his boundaries instead of my boundaries.

I would just try, like, continuously talk to them and interact even if they can't talk back.
Definitely about communication with knowing how to talk on one side of it and not understanding that you can't ask a question. I feel like that was hard, but I kind of like learned. I watched some YouTube videos too, trying to find like some good ways to communicate, and I found some good tools perfect.

You have to figure out how to talk without asking questions and like waiting for a response. Most of the things I've learned are like telling stories and like using like my hands to explain it to you.

I let him say whatever he wanted to say. And then when I picked up on that to say he took his breath when he was done, then I was like, OK, then I'll talk and say something.

Trying to get people to really come, interact, like have big groups of people.

Because of COVID, so many clubs have like died out at our school. It's really sad. And a lot of people aren't still comfortable coming to interactions because of COVID.

So the main issue seems to be getting them in the door. And in order to do that, I think you just have to kind of explain what it is and a very modest way.

We're all the same and there's nothing different with them than there is with like us.

I wish people could like more understand that they're just like us. Like, there's nothing different with them and that we're all the same.

They just want to have a good time, they're just like you or I, they just want to have fun.

But when you actually get to know them, they're pretty normal in a way. They're just normal people.
Shared Experiences

Participating in the extracurricular Best Buddies Club offers a range of social activities and opportunities for students to interact with their peers with disabilities. Participants described a range of emotions over their time in the club, beginning with feelings of trepidation and uncertainty, and ending with feelings of acceptance, love, and true friendship. Participants were asked to pinpoint their favorite experience with their buddy from this school year, and while some mentioned simple, everyday interactions, the majority recalled a special social event such as attending a football or a holiday-themed social that elicited a fond memory for them. When speaking about a club event at the High School football game, Jada said, “We got to have the buddies experience something that most teenagers in high school really like doing.” Attending a football game was an event that occurred across all three Best Buddies Club programs and was the most cited experience that participants in this study enjoyed with their peers with disabilities. This is likely because attending a high school football game is an age-appropriate social activity that most high schoolers enjoy. Sharing those experiences with peers with disabilities allowed a deeper appreciation of the event and a new perspective on the experience.

A participant from site one, Shari, named the tailgate and football game event as her favorite experience from the school year with the club. She recalled, “It was fun watching the game. It was fun cheering on, you know, the whole experience. I got to meet a lot of parents too, and they were excited. So that was fun to see.” Participants from site two described an event they started called “Buddies Week.” During Buddies Week, students with disabilities were able to join the cheerleaders at practice to learn some cheers for the upcoming game. The participating buddies were equipped with uniforms and pom-poms and joined the cheerleading squad on the field for the football game. Amy recalled this as her favorite memory of this school year:
We taught them cheers and they could do the cheers with us. But they left during halftime, so they don't get too tired. But they had so much fun and it was just so much fun working with them… they had the time of their life.

This level of social inclusion was unique to site two, but attending a high school football game seemed to be an overall impactful event for all members involved.

Another participant from site three described their football game experience by saying,

We went to a football game with all the buddies, and we had a whole section set out in the bleachers. And we were all just kind of cheering and talking about the game the whole time. That's really fun. I know they had a lot of fun that we got to watch, like pompoms and cheering, and they were like clapping.

The overall experience across sites and participants was that sharing a typical high school experience, such as attending a Friday night football game, was something that could very easily be enjoyed with their peers with disabilities. In fact, sharing the excitement of the event with their peers with disabilities seemed to elicit a greater appreciation for the event itself. Ten out of the fourteen participants recalled such events as their favorite experience in the club.

Across all three of the Best Buddies Clubs were a core team of student leaders in the club who helped plan, coordinate, and execute the social events. Many of the participants in the study discussed how taking on a leadership role in the club helped them become more involved. This was a sentiment described by participants across all three sites. Adrianna described this best by affirming,

This school year has probably been the most impactful. I think because I've been more in charge of projects, I have been on a lot more. Just involved in the past two years have been mostly a helper. But this year I've really been given the opportunity to take charge
of certain projects and just socials and parties. And that's been something really just gratifying for me and made me feel that I have a lot bigger part in everything.

Several participants described planning special events to celebrate holidays with their buddies. One club leader, Rachel, described a holiday-themed social she helped plan and how making socials interactive was important to get everyone involved,

Our Christmas social we had it was so fun, we did a lot of Christmas games, and we did gingerbread houses, competitions and then we did the game where you have Saran Wrap and like, you unwrap it and you get to it. And I just think it was really fun because it was a really interactive social and we got to move around in groups and stuff and everyone got to be with everyone. And so, I really think that was memorable and everyone was so happy.

Across interviews and focus groups, every participant described some type of interactive social event at one point or another that they truly enjoyed. The element of sharing an activity or active experience seemed to elicit strong responses from the participants because they felt a high level of involvement with their peers with disabilities.

**Description of the Club**

All participants were asked to describe reasons they joined the club, but also the impact the club had on them. The written response portion of data collection asked participants to write down how they would get more peers to join the club. The overwhelming majority of responses used words like “welcoming,” “fun,” and “friendship.” After participating in the club, all participants described the club with positive attributes. While most comments described the club as fun, impactful, and a great opportunity to make friends, others went further to describe their participation in the club as a highlight of their day or week. Rachel stated,
I could be having a bad day and I go to the social after school. I just go in her classroom and I'm just like, my day is turned around and it’s just like, so much better. And I just love seeing like how happy they are to get like social interactions with the with like other people because I see them in the classroom and then I see them with other people and they're just like, generally like, so excited and so happy and like that makes me so happy. And it's just an amazing club, and I'm really going to miss it. And hopefully there's something like similar in college.

**Development of Friendships**

Participants were asked to reflect on their time as a buddy and describe what they were most proud of. Almost every participant described the formation of unique and special friendships when they were describing their experience in the club. Several participants even went as far as to describe the friendships they formed as more genuine and closer than other friendships in their lives. Adrianna stated, “you're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment.” A similar sentiment was described by Karly during her 1:1 interview, recalling,

I'd say that they grow closer friendships than I have with regular students in my grade because they always come up to me and they know almost everything about me, and they're just more able to reach out to me than a lot of people are. So I do like having them as friends, and they're not going to do anything that would make me upset and they're just always there.
Adrianna went on to talk about how she had not realized how much her friendship had meant to one student until she recently paid her an unexpected visit during the school day and saw firsthand how much she meant to this student. She recalled,

I had just had a really, really bad day and I went to go and meet with her class a little bit late. And when I got there, you could see she was kind of like slumped over in her wheelchair, she was not really like engaging, but when she saw me, she screamed. She was like "best friend"!!! and it just, oh, that just really... I almost cried. She kept saying I missed you. I miss you so much. And that's just it… made me feel very, very just like this part of her life. And she's a part of my life and I did genuinely miss her. I really did. She makes me feel better, and she makes me feel like there's just a lot of good in the world and she's a good person.

**Self-Growth**

Every participant in the study was able to identify an area of self-growth after their experience as a buddy. The most common responses included learning to be more patient, expanding their communication skills, and gaining a new perspective on things.

**Patience**

When asked what they learned about themselves while serving as a buddy, half of the participants responded that they learned they could demonstrate more patience than they previously thought possible. Sentiments similar to Jada stating, “I've learned that I'm more patient than I actually thought I was,” were heard multiple times across research participants. Other participants elaborated on this to say that not only did they recognize they could be patient, but they had also developed a deeper understanding of patience through interactions with their buddies. Karly described this by recalling that her participation in the club had “helped me
become a lot more patient and helped me to be able to read people a lot better than I did before I joined.” Other participants related this growth in their patience to direct interactions with their buddies, referring to their buddies’ processing speed or their inability to immediately engage in activities. Andrea recalled,

I would say patience because sometimes they don't always do what you ask them to do or they won't, like, engage in some of the activities and you have to just keep trying and trying and just be patient with them.

Emory even took this notion further to describe how his newfound patience carried over to other people in his life, not just individuals with disabilities. He stated,

And so I now am able to be patient with people and not just the buddies, but people in my everyday life that I see all the time, like my parents and my younger brother. And even people I see at school every day because I used to have very little patience.

**Better Communication Skills**

When delving a bit deeper on areas of self-growth, several participants described how interacting with their buddy taught them valuable communication skills. Some described learning to understand body language and other non-verbal cues, while others pinpointed becoming better communicators in general. Rachel stated,

I definitely think I've learned to become a better communicator, and not just how to communicate with people with disabilities. But like they all have different personalities and I definitely learned communicate with a lot different people, and I've become more confident with communicating with a lot of people because I'm typically a shy person. But I kind of became more outgoing and I made so many more friendships and it
benefited me. So I definitely started to change from becoming as shy to being more extroverted and talking more.

Building on this concept, Emory went further to describe how serving as a buddy helped him develop better planning skills and improve his ability to interact with all types of people. I think it's very useful to go into best buddies it helps with planning skills and it helps with interacting with all sorts of people, which in the jobs that I am going into, consulting and real estate and marketing, even that be probably necessary in the workforce because you can't expect everybody to be on the same level as my friends.

**New Perspective**

Another common sentiment among participants was the fact that serving as a buddy allowed them to gain a new perspective on life. They frequently used the term “eye-opening” to describe their experience as a buddy. Participants expanded on how prior to joining the club, they were simply unaware of how to interact with students with disabilities in their school and how their peers with disabilities experienced the world around them.

Emory described how despite this being his first year serving as a buddy, his brief participation in the club helped him become more aware and understanding of others in general. His participation in the club carried over to how he interacted and engaged with people with disabilities in the community and in general. He elaborated,

I guess I'd say a lot more or I've become a lot more understanding of people with disabilities because I mean, prior I have had very little experience, I'd say, with people with disabilities, and I kind of I know of them, I know that they exist, but I don't really understand kind of how they work for lack of a better term, how they function. And so unless you're going to get to understand them more. And now, like if I see somebody out
and about with a disability like Down's Syndrome or can't really communicate too well or something right now, kind of like, oh, I see people like that all the time and it I understand it and it makes sense to me. So I'd say my understanding is changed a lot.

Adrianna took this further by describing how she gained a fresh new outlook on life through her participation in the club. Her interactions with her buddy and other students with disabilities gave her a new appreciation for those who were different. She stated,

I think I just I learned so much how not to judge just how to approach the world with an open heart. I think I think when I first initially came into Buddies, I was very close minded and very judgmental, and I think it took me a long time to learn, but it's helped me realize just. Just a better way to see the world in a better way to just go about meeting the people and just have a more of an open mind, open heart.

Ashley shared this sentiment elaborating on how this experience allowed her to see the world from her buddy’s perspective, specifically how students with disabilities might be sensitive to things others do not even notice, such as lights and noises. She shared,

It opens your eyes more. You can not only see from yourself, you put your perspective into your buddies perspective, you can see a lot more you can't feel the loud noises, the sounds, the other people there around you understand what it's like to be in that position.

Lastly, other participants relayed that through their interactions with their buddies, they had developed a more positive outlook on life. It was a general consensus that their buddies were overwhelmingly positive and loving despite facing a multitude of challenges. Rachel elaborated when saying,

They've taught me a lot. They really widened my perspective in general, like just the people in the world. But they've also taught me a lot. Just kind of how to be positive is
the most thing I've taken out from this because they're not in the best situation, but they're
the happiest and the most supportive people I've ever met. And it really influences me
and makes me want to be like that to other people, too. And they've changed me a lot for
the past four years.

Challenges

Participants were asked to reflect on any challenges they experienced as a buddy.
Responses ranged from broad challenges that were faced school and nationwide like the
pandemic, to very specific challenges they experienced with their individual buddy. It was very
interesting to hear how the participants overcame challenges, specifically with students who
were nonverbal. Lastly, participants mentioned challenges in continuing to gain participation in
the club by their peers.

Pandemic

When asked about the challenges they faced while serving as a buddy, the most common
response related to circumstances involving the pandemic. Several participants described how
protocols put in place during the pandemic greatly impeded their ability to connect with students
with disabilities in the club. In fact, several participants recalled how their experience last year
was diminished because interactions were taking place virtually on digital platforms. It was a
common consensus that this did not elicit strong connections between students with disabilities
and their peers. Andrea summarized it best by saying,

I would say with COVID having to like do like the things on Zoom that was definitely
challenging. It was much harder than being in person because you couldn't like grow as
close relationships with the buddies through a screen.
Although the interview question asked the participants to recount challenges they faced this school year as a buddy, most of them reverted back to the struggles they faced last school year surrounding the pandemic. Jada recounted how although schools were back in person this academic year, protocols and concerns about safety were still a factor this school year. She stated,

More recently the pandemic, the buddies really like, they like having hugs and stuff like that, and so making sure that they're safe as well. It's kind of has made it harder actually, like last year because last year we weren't at school at all. And so we were doing most everything through Zoom. So it was harder to have them do hands-on activities because when we have parties, we like to have them make cards and stuff as like this party we had on earlier this week. We had them making cards to give to their friends, our families. And last year during Zoom, we couldn't really do that since we're like, we can’t be in person. So I feel like that was one thing that really made it hard for us.

In-person, face-to-face interactions were clearly preferred by the participants in order to build connections and friendships with their peers with disabilities.

*Communication*

Another common challenge participants experienced were communication difficulties with their buddies diagnosed with speech and language disorders. Karly, whose buddy was non-verbal, described her greatest challenge serving as a buddy this year by saying,

I would say trying to communicate with ___ since it was so different. I've never experienced being with someone who wasn't able to talk, yeah, so it was learning his body language and learning his boundaries instead of my boundaries. So, I think it was very useful because I do want to go into something with children with disabilities. So
having this early on and like learning their… their cues instead of mine, it's like, helped me.

Other participants focused on the steep learning curve they endured when they first experienced interacting with a buddy who was nonverbal. Kelly described this challenge by talking about the changes she had to quickly make in her conversations with her buddy. She recalled,

You have to like, figure out how to talk without like asking questions like waiting for a response. So most of the things I've learned are telling stories and using my hands to explain it to you. And then changing my voice with like different emotions.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants were asked to recall how they overcame challenges they encountered as a buddy. Several participants demonstrated strong initiative and insight to overcome challenges with their buddy. The majority of the challenges revolved around communication deficits exhibited by the students with disabilities. Specifically, the challenge was with severely disabled students who were nonverbal. Participants paired with these buddies recalled strategies they had to learn in order to facilitate their interactions with their buddies that would not always be reciprocal.

Amy described how she would still include students in conversations and activities even if they were not able to verbally talk back to her. She described this when saying,

I would just try to continuously talk to them and interact even if they can't talk back. Just make sure they're in the conversation. And if they don't understand what's going on, just saying really like, slow it down and talk to them about it and just make sure that they are somewhat in the conversation or having a good time.
Uniquely, Kelly described how she had to learn to talk one-sided and how she independently sought out training online to help facilitate communication with her buddy. She recalled,

Definitely about communication with knowing how to talk on one side of it and not like understanding that you can't ask a question. I feel like that was hard, but I kind of learned. I watched some YouTube videos too, trying to find some good ways to communicate, and I found some good tools.

Another participant described a speech disorder, specifically stuttering, that her buddy suffered from and the strategies she developed on her own to help him cope and communicate better with her. Ashley described how she learned her buddy was done talking when he would “take a breath,” and this was her cue that she could respond. She pinpointed these challenges by saying,

Trying to understand them better. Like holding a conversation with them, like sometimes for ____, he will stutter, and he gets a little bit frustrated with it, but I try to understand and help him with it… I just let him talk. I let him say whatever he wanted to say. And then when I picked up on that to say he took his breath when he was done, then I was like, OK, then I'll talk and say something. Or if he interrupts me, I let him talk because I know he might not get the chance again to say that again. So, I just let him work through it.

And then I sit back, OK, take the time.

**Participation**

Lastly, participants described the challenge of gaining participation in the club throughout their schools. It was noted that the pandemic did decrease participation across sites in all clubs and extra-curricular activities. Several of the participants mentioned that they had a lot
of students who showed an interest in the club at the beginning of the year, but prolonged participation tended to fizzle out. Interestingly, during one of the focus group sessions, the participants started talking about how once they got non-disabled peer participants to the social events and interacting with the students with disabilities, they were often “hooked.” They described how they just needed to get people there so they could see the students and learn to love them just like they did. Emory summarized this in our focus group by saying,

    So, it does seem that we all agree that once you get them in the door, they're going to be fine. So, the main issue seems to be getting them in the door. And in order to do that, I think you just have to kind of explain what it is and a very modest way. Like they kind of are kind of just be like, it's just a place you, you interact with your friends and you get to interact some new people, but mainly it's just you and your friends, your chat and your having a good time playing games. There's food sometimes. And then once you get them, they kind of come off of that because again, people originally think that people with special needs might be unapproachable and they're like, I don't know, that kind of scares me. I don't really want to do that. But if you just relate to something much softer, much simpler, then they're more likely to come in. And then once they get there, they'll be fine. It's just getting there.

The conversation continued with the participants brainstorming ways to get people in the door. Amy suggested people come to the events with a friend. She said that this would perhaps make people feel more comfortable because they already knew someone there, and they could all interact together. She said,
We need to invite, like our friend groups or people that we know really well, because then we can still talk to them and interact with them, but they can also be interacting with the buddies at the same time.

Other participants talked about using social media and other platforms to spread awareness of the club throughout the school to increase participation. It was also suggested to do more during “school hours” because so many people were committed to other clubs, jobs, or sports after school hours. Overall, the participants provided great insight into how they could address and overcome challenges experienced in the club.

**Perception of Students with Disabilities Change**

Every participant involved in this study described how their own perception of people with disabilities had grown or changed in some way after serving as a buddy. It was common for participants to describe feelings of apprehension or being flat-out scared before joining Best Buddies Club. Adrianna described this by saying, “I initially went into it very scared. I was definitely very just hesitant and just kind of like ignorant, but I didn't know.” After moving past those feelings and deciding to participate anyway, she went on to say that she quickly learned,

It is one of the most welcoming and open places you can be to meet new people and you'll get to know more about yourself and more people who just see the world so differently. But in such a beautiful way, and you're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment.

Another participant, Rachel, shared that her perception of people with disabilities had changed quite a bit through her participation in the club. She described that she had never had a
negative view of people with disabilities, but that she had not experienced a connection with
them until joining the club. She recalled,

"I think that's changed quite a bit because I was never like, you know, I always saw it like
nothing bad about people with disabilities. But now that I've grown so close to them, I
don't think of them any differently as I would think of anyone like I see anyone down the
hallway and I'm just like, I'm very close with them, and I just like interacting with them
the same way I interact with everyone. And it's definitely changing that perspective.

"They're Just Like Us!"

One of the most common sentiments repeated by participants when describing students
with disabilities was that they were just like them. In fact, eight participants used some variation
of the phrase “They’re just like us.” Andrea said, “I wish people could like more understand that
they're just like us. Like, there's nothing different with them and that we're all the same” (Andrea,
1:1 Interview, February 17, 2022). Emory pointed out that they want to have fun just like
anyone else when saying, “that I mean, they just want to have a good time, they're just like you
or I, they just want to have fun.” Adrianna wished other people could come to the same
realization she had, that “they’re just like us!” She went on to say,

I wish people understood that they are, they're, just like us. they are. They are human.
They are what they have so much love to give, and they just want to get to know you and
they are some of the best people I know and that they approached the world with no
biases. They come into everything wholeheartedly and just have so much to offer. And
it's just they're just some of the best people I know.

During a focus group interview, the group started to talk about how throughout their educational
careers, they had seen students with disabilities in their schools, but had never really interacted
with them. Amy said, “growing up like an elementary school in middle school, like you would see kids with special needs, but you never like, interact with them and kind of be like a foreign concept.” She went on to say,

So the fact that in high school, you get to go and have clubs like this and interact with them, it kind of, I guess, like when you're growing up in your little, it looks like it's so foreign, like that can never be someone that you can relate to. And then getting into high school and actually being in a club with them and interacting with them, you're like, they're not that different. They're not foreign; they're me. Just the same thing. Like, you can form a single connection with them the same way you can form one with anyone else.

The conversation continued, and Rachel added the sentiment that people feel like students with disabilities are unapproachable. When saying this, the other members of the focus group immediately agreed with her. She went on to say,

I think people think they're like unapproachable, like I feel like people just don't think of them like, ‘Oh, I can’t talk to this person, I can’t relate to them at all.’ But, it's the complete opposite from that. They're just like you, just make friends with them, like you make friends with everybody and you just talk about your life and you find things that you have in common with them.

Interestingly, Katy, pointed out that she had seen students with disabilities throughout her educational career, but was not presented with an opportunity to interact with them until joining the Best Buddies Club in high school.

Me as well as kind of growing up around special-ed kids. Normally they're always kind of separated, so you never really get to experience anything with them. But I think
Buddies Club is just kind of, I feel like I've gotten more normalized to it and I'm used to them being there and they're just regular people once you get to know them, they are just slightly different. But they're all pretty, they're all really sweet and they're all nice. And yeah, I just kind of gotten used to being around them more often.

Katy’s feelings of acceptance only occurred through her direct participation in the Best Buddies Club. These statements indicate that programs like this would be beneficial earlier in life in order to foster that feeling of acceptance at a much younger age.

**Research Question Responses**

Through triangulation of data from one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and written responses from each participant, the research questions were thoroughly answered in the research study.

**Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of high school non-disabled students who socially interact with peers with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?”

The participants’ experiences as best buddies were described as rewarding, fun, and eye-opening. Across all data collection measures (1:1 interviews, focus groups, and writing prompt), participants consistently mentioned how their experience as a best buddy allowed them to see a new perspective on life and really opened their eyes to the lives of people with disabilities. All of the research participants recalled interactive social events as memorable and allowed them to form true connections and friendships with their peers with disabilities. Perhaps the most common sentiment made by the participants was that through their participation in the club they realized that students with disabilities were “just like them” and they could truly relate to them much easier than they imagined. The essence of this research study is that the experience of non-
disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club was an overwhelmingly positive one that allowed participants to not only identify areas of self-growth, but change their perception of people with disabilities in the process.

**Sub Question One**

How does interacting socially with peers with disabilities impact the non-disabled student’s perception of people with disabilities?

Several participants described a dramatic change in them from feelings of trepidation and downright fear at the beginning, to feelings of acceptance and love towards their buddies after participating in the club. Adrianna described this when saying,

Initially, I think I was more so scared to interact with buddies because it was very unknown to me, right? I just didn't understand. I didn't know if it was okay for me to talk to them. If I just… I would be interrupting their schedule, I just was very, very afraid. And since then, I feel that because I've been in buddies, I've been able to meet different like the spectrum of disability. So it's like understanding it's a different approach with everybody, but still just keeping an open mind and just going for it and being able to put yourself out there.

Continuing with Adrianna as an example, she displayed the strongest emotional connection during her interview when she was brought to tears describing the connection she formed with one of her buddies. She recalled realizing how much not only she meant to her buddy, but how much her buddy meant to her. She concluded,

And that's just it made me feel very, very just like this part of her life. And she's a part of my life and I did genuinely miss her. I really did like as they, she makes me feel better, and she makes me feel like there's just a lot of good in the world and she's a good person.
These firsthand accounts demonstrate how participation in the Best Buddies Club positively impacted the participants’ perception of people with disabilities. It was clear throughout all data collections measures (interviews, focus groups, and written responses) that each participant demonstrated growth in their perception of individuals with disabilities and now viewed them as “regular people” who were “just like them.”

**Sub Question Two**

How does frequent interaction with their peers with disabilities help non-disabled students recognize and overcome barriers to social interaction with students with disabilities?

Participants demonstrated a strong ability to recognize and overcome challenges when it came to interacting with a wide range of students with varying disabilities. Participants were paired with buddies with severe intellectual disabilities to more mild disabilities. Multiple participants described how visiting their buddy more often and spending more time with them allowed them to not only feel more comfortable, but allowed them to grow their skill set in improving interactions with them. Some participants credited observing teachers and staff members to learn how to better interact, while others sought out information and tools on their own to grow and learn. Some participants even described a trial and error or observational approach to determine strategies that worked best. Two participants described being paired with buddies who were nonverbal and the ways they managed this challenge. One turned to the internet, and researched communication methods appropriate for nonverbal students. The other participant followed the lead of the classroom teacher to navigate this new communication dynamic. Despite their various efforts and differing approaches, it was clear that high school non-disabled peers were more than capable of recognizing and overcoming barriers presented to them when interacting with students with disabilities.
Summary

This chapter described the experiences of 14 non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club at three suburban high schools in the southeast. Four main themes emerged from the research along with subthemes. The results answered the central research question of, What are the experiences of high school non-disabled students who socially interact with peers with disabilities in their role as a “best buddy?” The essence of this research study is that the experience of non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club was an overwhelmingly positive one that allowed participants to not only identify areas of self-growth, but change their perception of people with disabilities in the process. Participants demonstrated an uncanny ability to not only identify barriers to interacting with their peers with disabilities, but independently come up with ways to address the barriers and foster solutions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of non-disabled peer buddies participating in the extracurricular Best Buddies Club focused on social interaction with students with disabilities. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the findings, followed by interpretation of the results. Next, the implications for the study are discussed with regard to theoretical and empirical practice. Delimitations and limitations of the study are discussed. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Despite the federally mandated efforts put forth by the inclusion movement (IDEA, 1997), students with significant disabilities remain socially isolated from their peers in school systems across the country (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Pallisera et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018). Related literature clearly demonstrates that peer interaction has a multitude of positive effects on the lives of students with disabilities (Carter, 2019; Rossetti & Keenan, 2019). However, in order for this interaction to occur, school systems must provide opportunities for successful interactions to take place. Recent studies have shown that programs that attempt to spur interactions between the two groups in a social context versus in an academic classroom are more successful at eliciting a change in the nondisabled peers’ perception of students with disabilities (McManus et al., 2021). One way school systems can do this is through the implementation of the extracurricular Best Buddies Club. The Best Buddies Club provides opportunities for non-disabled high school
students to interact with their peers with disabilities through social activities and events in their own school and community.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experience of 14 non-disabled peers who socially interacted with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club in suburban high schools. This research study contributed to the limited body of literature presenting the perspective of the nondisabled students and how their frequent interactions with peers with disabilities impacted them. Key findings from this study include the development of strong connections, the identification of areas of self-growth, the ability to overcome challenges, and an improved perception of students with disabilities.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from this study provided a clear picture of what a non-disabled high school student experiences when serving as a buddy to a peer with a disability. Although the participants in the study were paired with buddies with a wide range of disabilities, the participants shared a lot of the same sentiments regarding what they learned and how they grew as an individual through serving in this role.

**Summary of Thematic Findings**

Overall, the consensus of the participants involved in this research study was that through their interactions with peers with disabilities, they were able to develop friendships, grow as an individual, overcome challenges, and change their perception of how they viewed people with disabilities.

**Given the Opportunity, True Friendships Can Form.** The results of this study aligned with previous research demonstrating how effective a peer network program can be at increasing
the interaction between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Herber et al., 2020; Marder et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2021). This research study was also able to not only demonstrate an increase in the level of interactions between the two groups, but also the development of friendships (Biggs & Snoodgrass, 2020; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018). This study confirmed that given the opportunity, friendships between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers are not only possible, but extraordinary meaningful. Several participants described the unique friendship they formed with their buddy and how that friendship carried over to include interactions with them outside of the club activities. Examples included exchanging birthday presents or attending other school events together not planned by the Best Buddies Club. It is also important to note that multiple participants in this study described their friendship with their peers with a disability as “more genuine” or “more real” than friendships they shared with their nondisabled peers.

**A Mutually Beneficial Experience.** The results of this study further solidified the notion that non-disabled peers interacting with students with disabilities is a mutually beneficial opportunity (Carter, 2019; Herbert et al., 2020; Marder et al. 2018). This research study demonstrated similar findings to the research conducted by Athamanah (2020), where college-level participants identified areas of growth and a change in their attitudes toward individuals with disabilities after serving as peer mentors to high school students with intellectual disabilities.

Every participant in this study experienced areas of growth and development that they directly attributed to their time spent as a buddy to a student with a disability. These areas of growth ranged from as minor as gaining more patience or gratitude to the development of strong communication and strategic planning skills that the participants discussed being directly
applicable to their future career goals. All the while, students with disabilities were socially included with their peers through their participation in events at their school and in their community. Several participants discussed how their friendships with their buddies carried over to socializing with them outside of planned club socials to include eating lunch together, attending school sporting events together, or even just interacting in the hallways during class change together. These findings demonstrated that participation in the Best Buddies Club was a mutually beneficial experience for all members involved.

**Capable of Overcoming Challenges.** An unexpected finding from this study was the fact that high school non-disabled peers are more than capable of overcoming challenges that arise when interacting with students with significant disabilities. Participants pinpointed direct communication and behavioral challenges encountered when spending time with their peers with a disability. Several participants were able to describe strategies and tools they used to overcome these challenges, such as locating resources online to learn how to communicate with students who were nonverbal. A few participants used teacher and staff models, while others sought out their own resources or performed trial and error approaches to figure out what worked best for their own buddy.

The literature demonstrates the multitude of challenges that could arise and negatively impact social interactions to include social skill deficits, communication impairments, and atypical behavior (Carter, 2018; Joseph et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Wehemeyer et al., 2016). After conducting this study and confirming results with other research in the field, the best way to combat these challenges is to provide supported opportunities for interaction (Schaefer et al., 2018). Every student with a disability is different, and the best way to improve their interactions with their nondisabled peers is to increase the frequency of interaction with their peers. That
way, both parties can learn from each other and improve their social interactions together. This goes back to the theoretical framework guiding this study, the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and how important social interaction between diverse individuals is for learning in general.

**Becoming Normalized.** There was strong consensus among the participants that their experience as a best buddy allowed them to become *normalized* to their peers with disabilities. According to Culham and Nind (2003), the two most major movements impacting the lives of people with disabilities is normalization and inclusion. Normalization underscores the need to treat people with disabilities as a part of society (Culham & Nind, 2003). This study demonstrated that participation in the Best Buddies Club is one way to have nondisabled peers see people with disabilities as part of their community and society as a whole.

This study found that the majority of the participants stated that through their participation in Best Buddies Club, they discovered that students with disabilities were in fact normal. Participants made statements such as “They’re just like us” or “They’re more like you than you think” or even as far as saying participating in the club allowed them to become more normalized to students with disabilities.

Participant Katy said it best when we discussed this very topic in our focus group interview, “I’ve gotten more normalized to it and I'm used to them being there, and they're just regular people once you get to know them, they are just slightly different.” The other members of the group not only agreed, but gave their own accounts of personal discovery that their peers with disabilities were not only just like them, but that they could form connections with them just like they could with anyone else. These findings align with previous research on contact-based interventions improving disability awareness in non-disabled peers (Chae et al., 2019; McManus
Participants in this study also stated that the frequency in which they interacted with the students with disabilities dramatically impacted their level of comfort and overall perception of people with disabilities.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from this research study reveal implications for nondisabled peers, schools, and staff members. These implications are discussed below to include recommendations for each group.

**Implications for Nondisabled Peers**

This research revealed the perspective of nondisabled peers who participated in the Best Buddies Club and the areas of growth they experienced while serving in this role. This study aligned with previous research in the field to pinpoint areas of self-growth from non-disabled peers, the development of friendships, and a change in their perceptions of people with disabilities (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2017). It is important for non-disabled peers who are already members of the club to continue to invite other friends to join the club as well in order to continue to spread awareness and drive participation in the club. Through spreading awareness and increasing participation in the club, nondisabled peer members can continue to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities by helping make their schools and communities more inclusive environments. These findings should encourage further participation in the Best Buddies Club and similar programs by nondisabled peers everywhere.

Lastly, it is hoped that the results of this study will encourage non-disabled peers to continue to look for ways to socially interact with adults with disabilities as they move on to
college and beyond. It is the role of citizens, neighbors, and friends to foster a sense of lifelong inclusivity for individuals with disabilities.

Implications for Schools

It is well documented in the literature that in order for social inclusion to occur, programs aimed at fostering interaction between students with disabilities and their peers must be implemented (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Hymel & Katz, 2019; Magnusson et al., 2016). The findings from this study underscore the need for school systems everywhere to implement programs like the Best Buddies Club school-wide across grade levels.

Implementing programs like the Best Buddies Club could continue to foster an inclusive schooling environment while allowing non-disabled peers to grow as leaders and community members. The results of this study demonstrated that when given the opportunity, nondisabled peers will actively interact with their peers with disabilities. In fact, this study showed that across all research sites, participants not only actively engaged with their peers with disabilities, but they formed genuine connections with them through serving in their role as a buddy. School systems must provide these opportunities for successful interaction between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers to occur if social inclusion measures are going to improve. The results from this study should encourage school systems to facilitate programs like the Best Buddies Club throughout their schools in order to continue to strive for socially inclusive practices for the entire student body. Information on how to start a Best Buddies Club is available online at https://www.bestbuddies.org/bbu/start-a-chapter/.

Implications for Staff

Previous research pinpoints teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school leaders as the key individuals capable of facilitating meaningful interactions between students with disabilities
and non-disabled peers (Brown, 2019; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018; Sigstad, 2018; Ziegler et al., 2020). This study demonstrated the pivotal role staff members played in the successful implementation of the extracurricular Best Buddies Club. The research findings from this current study suggest the planning and leadership demonstrated by the faculty club sponsor led to the execution of successful and safe club events for which the participants flourished.

Participants in the research study recalled how they looked to the staff members for guidance throughout their time serving as a best buddy, specifically when interacting with students with significant disabilities. It is vital that Special Education staff members recognize their role as an advocate for the continued inclusion of their students with disabilities throughout their school and community. This research study showed that one way to improve the social inclusion of students with disabilities is through participation in the Best Buddies Club. Staff members play a pivotal role in initially facilitating the interaction between the nondisabled peers and the students with disabilities. This support is faded as appropriate so that the nondisabled peers can work to form their own connections with the students with disabilities. This study also showed that staff members can delegate tasks to student leaders participating in the club and oversee their progress in these roles. This was demonstrated at each site and participants relayed serving in these leadership roles helped them become more involved and engaged in the club.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This section relates the findings from this study to the theoretical and empirical research in the field. The research results from this study confirmed findings from the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), demonstrating learning through interactions with diverse others. The results from this study also aligned with other research in the field, attributing frequent interaction with students with disabilities to areas of self-growth, the
development of friendships, and a change in perception of people with disabilities (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2017).

**Theoretical Implications**

This study demonstrated the mutually beneficial aspects of serving as a buddy to a student with disabilities for both the non-disabled peer and the student with a disability. Furthermore, this study very clearly depicts the areas in which a nondisabled peer can grow and learn by serving in the role of a best buddy to a peer with a disability. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) states that new patterns of behaviors are learned through direct experience and reciprocal interactions. This research study provided firsthand accounts of how the experience of serving as a best buddy to a peer with a disability spurred learning and behavior changes from the participants themselves.

The identification of areas of self-growth from each participant in this research study aligns with the theoretical framework guiding this study, the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The Social Constructivism Theory focuses on the learning that takes place through the social interaction of two diverse individuals. It was evident in participant interviews and focus group sessions that through their interactions with the students with disabilities, they were able to pinpoint areas of self-growth that spurred from those interactions. In fact, each participant involved in the study was able to articulate at least one area of self-growth that they attributed to their interactions with students with disabilities. This study adds to the literature on learning and growth occurring through social interactions with others.

This learning that occurred through the interaction with *diverse others* (Schreiber & Valle, 2013) is attributed to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)(Vygotsky, 1978). For this study, nondisabled peers were paired with students with disabilities, and based on their ability
level, faculty members and staff provided a certain level of support in order to help facilitate strong social interactions. This level of support was faded over time and varied greatly among participants as each ZPD was different for each participant. This study further demonstrated that by pairing students from diverse backgrounds, a certain level of learning can occur. Furthermore, this learning can be enhanced when the level of support is recognized and adequately faded by facilitators.

**Empirical Implications**

Literature in the field identifies key barriers attributing to the continued social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level to include: social skill limitations (Carter, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016; Schafer et al., 2018; Sigstad, 2017), communication impairments (Joseph et al., 2021; Pennington et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020), behavior limitations (Levin & Hanson, 2020; Lyons et al., 2016), and lack of schoolwide social inclusion efforts (Chung et al., 2019; Garolera et al., 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Pallisera et al., 2016; Petrina et al., 2014; Rosetti & Keenan, 2018). Results from this research identified these same barriers (identified as challenges by the participants in this study) when interacting with students with disabilities. However, results from this study show that despite the challenges, when given the opportunity, non-disabled peers will interact with students with disabilities and are able to overcome challenges that arise.

The results from this study directly aligned with the other research available on the impact of interacting with students with disabilities has on non-disabled peers to include personal growth, the development of friendships, and an improved perception of individuals with disabilities by the participants (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2017). This study further solidified these areas of impact, providing direct accounts from peers on just how poignant serving as a buddy to a peer with a disability was on their life.
These firsthand accounts paint a clear picture of just how meaningful programs like Best Buddies Club can be for all members involved.

This study helps fill a gap in the literature addressing the problem of continued social isolation of students with disabilities at the high school level (Carter, 2018; Marder et al., 2017; Rossetti & Keenan, 2018). The results from this study present clear findings that programs like the Best Buddies Club are an effective intervention for facilitating more inclusive practices school-wide. This study also fills a gap in the literature by giving a voice to the nondisabled peers interacting with students with disabilities. Hearing their voices articulate challenges they experienced firsthand can help stakeholders identify areas that may need more support when facilitating inclusive practices in schools nationwide.

Results from this study demonstrate it is important to incorporate an instructional piece for the nondisabled peers as a part of the club. Holding one or two informational sessions after the participants have a chance to meet their buddies could present an opportunity for them to ask specific questions related to interacting with their buddy. Several participants sought ways to overcome the challenges on their own, but building in an instructional piece to facilitate that learning could benefit all members in the club.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Just as all studies do, this study involved several delimitations and limitations. However, it is not thought to have negatively impacted the study. Delimitations are found in the parameters set forth for the study at hand. For this study, a specific criterion was followed in order to properly research the desired phenomenon.
**Delimitations**

For this study, purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who were highly involved in the Best Buddies Club and who had rich experiences of the phenomenon. Participants in this study had to be high school aged non-disabled peer members of a Best Buddies Club at Creekside, Harrison, or Brookstone High School. Because the purpose of this study was to describe the shared experience of the non-disabled peers, students with disabilities were not given the opportunity to provide their voice on how the club impacted them.

**Limitations**

This research study was limited to one school system (three sites) in the southeast. Participants were limited to those that responded to the recruitment email, thus limiting the sample size. It was difficult to elicit participation in the research study by sites unfamiliar to myself the researcher, thus, only three sites were used. One limitation of this study was the participation of only one male participant. Although this is representative of the club demographic (overwhelmingly female), it presents a limitation. For logistical reasons, half of the interviews and one focus group were held via the Zoom platform. This did not affect the data collected or the conversational tone between the researcher and participant. During one Zoom interview, we did experience some connectivity issues, but were able to resolve and continue.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As this research study focused solely on presenting the perspective of the non-disabled peers, future research could seek to include the perspective of the students with disabilities as well to further corroborate the mutually beneficial aspects of the Best Buddies Club. This could be done using a multiple case study to include two students and a faculty sponsor. Demonstrating the direct impact these social interactions have on students with disabilities could help further
motivate school systems and key stakeholders to implement programs like the Best Buddies Club.

Future research could also include a grounded theory study in order to develop a theoretical model of the growth students make through participation in the Best Buddies Club. This could further document the impact such clubs have on its members and their process of development through the experience.

Future research on this topic could expand to survey more Best Buddies Clubs nationwide to expand the perspective of the participants to other parts of the country or world. Gathering more information from a broader area would allow for more diverse responses and provide a complete view of what works best for Best Buddies Clubs in the future.

Future research should also look to increase the voice of male participants in programs like the Best Buddies Club. Further research in the area could examine why participation is low among males. Seeking the perspective of male participants on motivation for participating in the club could help pinpoint ways to increase participation by males in the future.

Future research should look at other age groups as well to see if the results can be replicated across grade levels. In order to truly foster a sense of social inclusion for individuals with disabilities, programs like the Best Buddies Club should be implemented at all grade levels. Future research should investigate if programs like Best Buddies Club can be just as effective in elementary or middle schools.

**Conclusion**

This transcendental phenomenological study presented the experience nondisabled students shared \((N = 14)\) when serving as a buddy to a peer with a disability in a high school setting. Data was collected through 1:1 interviews, focus group interviews, and written
responses. Results of this study found that given the opportunity, nondisabled peers could form true connections and friendships with their peers with disabilities. Overall, the consensus of the participants involved in this research study was that through their interactions with peers with disabilities, they were able to develop friendships, grow as an individual, overcome challenges, and change their perception of how they viewed people with disabilities. The research results from this study confirmed findings from the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), demonstrating learning through social interactions with diverse others. The results from this study also aligned with other research in the field, attributing frequent interaction with students with disabilities to areas of self-growth, the development of friendships, and a change in perception of people with disabilities. The findings suggest the expansion and further implementation of programs like the Best Buddies Club could continue to drive socially inclusive practices in school systems everywhere.
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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 4, 2022

Joanna Cavender
Lucinda Spaulding

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY21-22-412 Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities

Dear Joanna Cavender, Lucinda Spaulding:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: January 4, 2022. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
February 16, 2022

Joanna Cavender
Lucinda Spaulding

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-412 Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities

Dear Joanna Cavender, Lucinda Spaulding,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-412 Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities.

Decision: Approved

Your request to "seek the participation of research participants at other sites" within the school district has been approved. Thank you for submitting documentation of permission from the district and your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent forms and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent forms should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent documents should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB’s requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
Appendix B

Site Approval

February 3, 2022

Joanna Cavender

Re: File ID 2022-26

Dear Ms. Cavender,

This is to advise you that your research application, “Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities,” (ID Number 2022-26), has satisfactorily met Research Standards and was approved by the Institutional Review Board. The approved research period is February 4, 2022 to June 30, 2022. Should you need more time to complete your project, you will need to contact us for the approval of an extension. Please note the following comments regarding your study and the requirements of you as a researcher in

Strengths
• Research Standard 1: The results of this study have great potential impact for the district in terms of enhancing the district’s diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.
• Research Standard 2: The proposal is well-developed and has a strong foundation in prior research.

Limitation
• The researcher will need to ensure that recruitment emails are designed to be applicable to the recruitment of students at all three high schools.

Please note the following requirements of you as a researcher in
• A copy of this approval letter must be attached to any initial communication with a parent or office.
• The above File ID number must be included in the subject line of any communication with a parent or district office concerning this research study.
• To receive any extant data, researchers need a fully executed Privacy & Security Terms (PST) document. Email this letter of approval to [email protected] to begin the PST process.
Appendix C

Recruitment Email

(18-year-old participants)

Dear Best Buddies Club Members,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to better understand the perspective of general education students socially interacting with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take a brief survey (5 minutes), participate in a 1:1 interview (45 minutes), participate in 1 focus group interview (1 hour), respond to 1 writing prompt (10 minutes), and participate in member checking (30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here: https://forms.gle/5HZgoFHJfCrM8Mut6

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to Joanna Cavender or sign it electronically using Adobe Sign. If you are signing it electronically, it will automatically be submitted back to the researcher.

Participants will each receive a $10 Starbucks gift card upon completion of the study.

Sincerely,

Joanna Cavender
Special Education Teacher

770-630-0662
Joanna.Cavender@gcpsk12.org
Recruitment email: Participants under 18 years old

Dear Best Buddies Club Members and Parents,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to better understand the perspective of general education students socially interacting with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take a brief survey (5 minutes), participate in a 1:1 interview (45 minutes), participate in 1 focus group interview (1 hour), respond to 1 writing prompt (10 minutes), and participate in member checking (30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please discuss this study with your parents and go over the parental consent form attached to this email.

The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, both you and your parents will need to sign the consent document and return it to at Joanna Cavender. If you are signing electronically via Adobe Sign, I will need your parents email address to obtain their signature and then it will be sent to you for your signature. Once I receive your signed consent form, I will email you a link to the demographic information survey.

Participants will each receive a $10 Starbucks gift card upon completion of the study.

Sincerely,

Joanna Cavender
Special Education Teacher
Appendix D

Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities
Principal Investigator: Joanna Cavender, Ed.S, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether or not you want to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to better understand the perspective of general education students socially interacting with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete a brief survey (5 minutes).
2. Participate in an audio/visual recorded 1:1 interview (45 minutes).
3. Participate in an audio/visual recorded focus group (1 hour).
4. Respond to a brief writing prompt (10 minutes).
5. Participate in the member checking process and review transcripts (30 minutes).

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society may include inspiring other members of the community to get involved in organizations aimed at socially interacting with students with disabilities.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

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 and may be used in future presentations. 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 will have access to these recordings.
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 you be compensated for being part of the study?**
Participants will be compensated for participating in this study with a $10 Starbucks gift card presented upon completion of the study.

**Is study participation voluntary?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Public Schools. If you decide to participate you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**
If you choose 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, data collected from you, 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 contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**
The researcher serves as a teacher in Public School system and a club sponsor for the Best Buddies Club at the High School level. She does not serve as a classroom teacher, supervisor, or evaluator over any club members. Participation in the club is purely voluntary and no credit or grades are given. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**
The researcher conducting this study is Joanna Cavender. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at or Lucinda Spaulding, at .

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your 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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.
Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing 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 participate in the study._

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date
Appendix E

Child Consent Form

Combined Parental Consent and Student Assent/Parental Opt-Out

Title of the Project: Best Buddies Club: A Phenomenological Study of the Non-Disabled Peer Perspective on Socially Interacting with Students with Disabilities

Principal Investigator: Joanna Cavender, Ed.S, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your student is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be non-disabled peer members of the Best Buddies Club. 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 student 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 better understand the perspective of general education students socially interacting with students with disabilities through their participation in the Best Buddies Club.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your student to be in this study, I will ask him or her to do the following things:

1. Complete a brief survey (5 minutes).
2. Participate in an audio/visual recorded 1:1 interview (45 minutes).
3. Participate in an audio/visual recorded focus group (1 hour).
4. Respond to a brief writing prompt (10 minutes).
5. Participate in the member checking process and review transcripts (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 may include inspiring other members of the community to get involved in organizations aimed at socially interacting with students with disabilities.

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 student would encounter in everyday life.

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 and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-412
Approved on 2-16-2022
• 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 will have access to these recordings.

• 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 be compensated for participating in this study with a $10 Starbucks gift card presented upon completion of the study.

---

**Is study participation voluntary?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your student to participate will not affect your or his or her current or future relations with Liberty University or Public Schools. If you decide to allow your student to participate, she or he 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 student from the study or your student chooses to withdraw, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw her or him or should your student choose to withdraw, data collected from your student, 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 student’s contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw him or her, or if your student chooses to withdraw.

---

**Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**
The researcher serves as a teacher for Public School system and a club sponsor for the Best Buddies Club at the High School level. She does not serve as a classroom teacher, supervisor, or evaluator over any club members. Participation in the club is purely voluntary and no credit or grades are given. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

---

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**
The researcher conducting this study is Joanna Cavender. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [email] and/or [phone]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. [name].

---

**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 [email].
Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

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<thead>
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<th>Your Consent/Opt-Out</th>
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<tr>
<td>By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your student 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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my student to participate in the study.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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

---

Printed Student’s Name

Parent’s Signature Date

Minor’s Signature Date

If you would prefer that your child NOT PARTICIPATE in this study, please sign this document and return it to Joanna Cavender in room

Printed Child’s/Student’s Name

Parent’s Signature Date

---

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-412
Approved on 2-16-2022
Appendix F

Demographic Survey Questions

1. Full name: ________________________________

2. Age: ________________________________

3. Grade:
   Mark only one oval.
   - 9
   - 10
   - 11
   - 12

4. Gender:
   Mark only one oval.
   - Male
   - Female

5. Ethnicity:
   Mark only one oval.
   - Caucasian
   - African American
   - Asian
   - Hispanic
   - American Indian/ Alaskan Native
   - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

6. How many years have you been involved with the Best Buddies Club (Middle and/or High School): ________________________________
## Appendix G

### 1:1 Interview Protocol

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1. **Tell me a little bit about yourself (how would your family/friends describe you?)**

2. **What made you want to join Best Buddies Club?**

3. **Describe your experience serving as a best buddy this school year.**

4. **Describe your buddy (student with disability).**

5. **What do you wish all people knew or understood about your buddy?**

6. **What was your favorite experience you shared with your buddy this year?**

7. **What, if anything, challenged you while serving as a buddy? How did you overcome this challenge?**

8. **What have you learned about yourself while serving as a buddy? Please explain the situation that prompted you to recognize this.**

9. **How, if at all, has your opinion about people with disabilities changed? Please provide a specific example of an experience that caused you to change your point of view.**

10. **What are you most proud of after serving as a buddy this year and why?**

11. **How did you overcome social interaction barriers with your buddy? (Communication difficulties, behavior, etc)**
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Have your professional and future goals for yourself changed at all after serving as a best buddy?</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>How, if at all, has this experience serving as a buddy impacted your thoughts about what you want to do beyond high school?</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?</td>
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Appendix H

Focus Group Protocol

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<th>Date:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participants:</td>
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</table>

1. Describe how you have grown as an individual through serving as a “best buddy.”

2. What was your most impactful memory from this school year with your buddy?

3. What do you think is this biggest misconception about people with disabilities? Has your opinion about people with disabilities changed at all over this year?

4. Do you plan to continue to interact with people with disabilities in the future and in what capacity (either through Best Buddies Club again or a similar program in college)?

5. What recommendations do you have for way to improve the “Best Buddies Club” program?

6. What would you do differently if you were in charge of the club? Are there better ways to include students with disabilities in our school?
Appendix I

Letter Writing Prompt

The following writing prompt was emailed to each participant:

Now that you have been a member of the Best Buddies Club, I would like for you to think about ways to invite other peers to join the club as well. Please respond to the following prompt with 4-5 sentences.

“What would you say to recruit people to join this club next year?” Imagine your statement being read on the school announcements to entice people to sign up for the Best Buddies Club!
Appendix J

Sample Interview Transcript

*Interview Transcript - Adrianna*

| Researcher (me) | 00:01 | OK. To get us started, can you tell me a little bit about yourself, like how would your family and friends describe you? |
| Adrianna        | 00:08 | OK, well, my name is [REDACTED] and my family, friends who describe me as being very caring and empathetic, I always do my best to try to be there for other people and just give my all with what I am involved with. I typically in high school, I have been most consistently apart of best buddies club for the past four years and I have been a [REDACTED] cheerleader for the past three years. |
| Researcher (me) | 00:38 | Oh, awesome. OK. And what made you want to join Best Buddies Club? |
| Adrianna        | 00:45 | I want to join best buddy club mostly because my friends had been in it since middle school and they kept talking about just how much fun it is, how to meet new people, and I honestly didn't know what it was for a little bit. And so I went to the first one of the first meetings my freshman year, and I just loved it. It was just there, just so much interacting. There's so much. It was fun and I just it was a lot of fun. |
| Researcher (me) | 01:11 | Awesome. Can you describe your experience serving as a buddy this school year? |
| Adrianna        | 01:17 | This school year has probably been the most impactful. I think because I've been more in charge of projects I have been on a lot more. Just involved in the past two years have been mostly a helper. But this year I've really been given the opportunity to take charge of certain projects and just socials and parties. And that's been something really just gratifying for me and made me feel that I have a lot bigger part in everything. |
| Researcher (me) | 01:46 | Right. That's great. OK, can you describe...so at my school we pair everybody up where they have like a specific buddy? But I know that [REDACTED] they've told me that you guys kind of are this all buddies, and it's like a group that. But could you describe a buddy to me, like maybe one that you've gotten the closest with or one that has left an impactful memory with you? |
| Adrianna        | 02:08 | I have two buddies that I've been really the closest with. One is [REDACTED]. She is. She's been here. She's been at [REDACTED]. So I think for as long as I have actually seen her too, she is primarily nonverbal. And so it and so it's been a little bit harder to build a connection with her. But at the same time, every time she sees me immediately recognizes my face and she'll grab my hand and want to walk around. She's been just as she's just so caring like she did, too. She wants you to be involved. She'll tell that she wants to meet everybody. And she's just and I have another one that I've really gotten close to this year. And she I don't want to get
emotional because she just there's something that happened like early this week, even though I just really made me feel really important and really just like, OK, I'm this is this is a good thing. But I just met her this year and really have gotten to interact with her more in her class rather than just the Buddies club. So I got to see her a lot more often. And we'd always just like walk around the school during my seventh periods and one day I like this past this past Tuesday, I think I had just had a really, really bad day and I went to go and meet with her class a little bit late, so I'd help out one of my teachers. And when I got there, you could see she was kind of like slumped over in her seat. She was not really like engaging when she saw me and she screamed. She was like "best friend"!!! and it just, oh, that just really. I almost cried. She kept saying I missed you. I miss you so much. And that's just it made me feel very, very just like this part of her life. And she's a part of my life and I did genuinely miss her. I really did like as they she makes me feel better, and she makes me feel like there's just a lot of good in the world and she's a good person.

Researcher (me)  04:13  Oh, that is so sweet. Thank you for sharing that story. That was wonderful. OK, what do you wish that all people knew or understood about people with disabilities?

Adrianna  04:26  I wish people understood that they are there, just like us. They are human. They are what they have so much love to give, and they just want to get to know you and they are some of the best people I know and that they approached the world with no biases. They come into everything wholeheartedly and just have so much to offer. And it's just they're just some of the best people I know. That's awesome.

Researcher (me)  05:02  OK. What was your favorite experience that you shared and spent this year with some of the buddies?

Adrianna  05:09  This year, I was able to organize and hold the Valentine's Day social that we had with two of our separate special ED classes, and so my and even we even got to involve one of my other classes, peer leading class. It was just regular education and special ED students. They're all together in a party and they got to exchange Valentine's Day cards. And it was just promoting a lot more interaction, even just between the two different levels of special ED classes in the school. Just not like pairing up the really non-verbal students with more interacting ones, building on their skills and building on just their interactions of other people and asking everyone to get to know them.

Researcher (me)  05:56  Right. That is awesome. I love that. OK, what has challenged you while serving as a buddy?

Adrianna  06:04  I think the biggest thing for me has been time. I think I want to give so much of my time, I want to be there all of the time. But definitely my schedule is not exactly allowed for it. And so it's been really hard learning to kind of just give control to other people. And like, I know, I want people to be like, OK and make sure this, make sure that and just make sure everyone is taken care of it means that everyone is cared for.
But understanding that like I have my limits with my schedule and just learning that this is time for other people to make their connections, not just me. And yeah, yeah, that's a good point. Like that? OK? What have you learned about yourself while serving as a buddy?

Oh, no, I think I just I learned so much how not to judge just how to approach the world with an open heart. I think I think when I first initially came in to Buddy's, I was very close minded and very judgmental, and I think it took me a long time to learn, but it's helped me realize just. Just a better way to see the world in a better way to just go about meeting new people and just have a more of an open mind, open heart.

Then my next question kind of talks about that is how has your opinion of people with disabilities changed? So what kind of changed your mindset about people with disabilities?

Initially, I think I was more so scared to interact with buddies because it was very unknown to me, right? I just didn't understand. I didn't know if it was OK for me to talk to them. if I just I would be interrupting their schedule who I just was very, very afraid. Right? And since then, I feel that because I've been buddies, I've been able to meet different like the spectrum of disability. So it's like understanding it's a different approach, everybody, but still just keeping an open mind and just just going for it and being able to put yourself out there.

Then my next question kind of talks about that is how has your opinion of people with disabilities changed? So what kind of changed your mindset about people with disabilities?

Initially, I think I was more so scared to interact with buddies because it was very unknown to me, right? I just didn't understand. I didn't know if it was OK for me to talk to them. if I just I would be interrupting their schedule who I just was very, very afraid. Right? And since then, I feel that because I've been buddies, I've been able to meet different like the spectrum of disability. So it's like understanding it's a different approach, everybody, but still just keeping an open mind and just just going for it and being able to put yourself out there.

I'm most proud of being able to make my friends and meet my friends, I really they're they're... they're people. I am going to remember after I graduated, I'm hoping when I do come back and visit later next year when I graduated, I just there are people that I'm going to remember and they're going to stick with me. And when it comes to the future, and I'm hoping in college to find another program that I can join so that I can be with me so I can still be involved with special ed and special education individuals. I just got all these friendships, and I really don't want to let all those go.

OK. How did you overcome any social interaction barriers like you talked about the student that was nonverbal or limited verbal abilities? Or maybe some students have had some behavioral difficulties? How did you kind of overcome that?

Yeah, it was definitely trial and error. I think I initially tried to take the umbrella approach. Everybody, I was very just like, enthusiastic and bubbly, and I thought that would be OK, but I had to learn kind of the hard way. Oh no, it would. It w--ould set some individuals off and you go, give them they would get a little nervous. They would not exactly reciprocate it. So I mean, I would just go into each one and just see what they liked. It was not so much me what I wanted to do, but what did they want to do? What did they enjoy? What did they like my friend
she loves to dance. So every social there's music we would just be dancing. She loves to walk around, and she loves to talk about Disney Channel and I am like, I love Disney Channel. So it's like we were just talking about just getting to know what they like getting to know what they like.

Researcher (me) 10:23 So just spending more time with them, you got more comfortable?

Adrianna 10:28 Yes.

Speaker 10:29 Perfect. OK. Have your own professional or feature goals for yourself changed at all after serving as a buddy?

Adrianna 10:38 I did for a minute. I am planning on going into nursing. I there was a moment where I had considered going into education specifically for special education students because I would see teachers like Miss [redacted] and I would say teachers like Miss [redacted] and [redacted] and Mr. [redacted]. And I was like, Ok I really... I just have so much respect and love for them that I just saw how much they're doing it, honestly. I love doing this. I love spending time with these individuals and these people. And it did. It did for a solid second. It was a possibility, but I ultimately did choose to go in to nursing.

Researcher (me) 11:21 Yeah. And do you think that serving as a buddy has taught you any useful skills or impacted you down that career path? So like, have you learned anything that you think will be applicable in college or as a nurse?

Adrianna 11:35 I think in terms of what I'm hoping for when I go into nursing and just being able to take care of babies is that even if there are babies are born with disabilities and just learning how to be just more nurturing, more caring and just like playing and playing to what they need, I'm I'm hoping that. It helps give me more of a perspective of how to talk to how to talk to them and how to help them through these difficult processes.

Researcher (me) 12:14 Awesome communications. OK, well, just kind of summarize and call that our interview. Can you just describe how Best Buddies Club has kind of impacted you and your overall feelings about the club?

Adrianna 12:29 Well, like I said, I initially went into it very scared. I was definitely very just hesitant and just kind of like ignorant, but I didn't know and I love that best buddy's Club one is just so welcoming. It is one of the most welcoming and open places you can be to meet new people and you'll get to know more about yourself and more people who just see the world so differently. But in such a beautiful way, and you're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment. I love the best buddies club has been able to connect me with other individuals like me who just want to you to help and want to do that. I've met so many of the people that are now my very close friends, and I've been able to spend time with them, and I just feel like it's best buddy's club is a place to make connections. And
that's a very good place to just learn more about yourself and about those who have so much love to give.

# Appendix K

## Sample Interview Protocol with Bracketing

### 1:1 Interview Protocol

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
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1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (how would your family/friends describe you?)
   - outgoing

2. What made you want to join Best Buddies Club?
   - Elementary, Special Ed.

3. Describe your experience serving as a Best Buddy this school year.
   - Halloween, togetherness

4. Describe your buddy (student with disability).
   - Ray of sunshine, talkative, niche interest (name), warm hearted

5. What do you wish all people knew or understood about your buddy?
   - Human

6. What was your favorite experience you shared with your buddy this year?
   - Christmas gift exchange

7. What, if anything, challenged you while serving as a buddy? How did you overcome this challenge?
   - Understand speech, stutter, sensitivities

8. What have you learned about yourself while serving as a buddy? Please explain the situation that prompted you to recognize this.
   - Time, His time

9. How, if at all, has your opinion about people with disabilities changed? Please provide a specific example of an experience that caused you to change your point of view.
   - Protective over buddy

10. What are you most proud of after serving as a buddy this year and why?
    - Friendships

11. How did you overcome social interaction barriers with your buddy? (Communication difficulties, behavior, etc)
    - Followed his lead, stuttery
12. Have your professional and future goals for yourself changed at all after serving as a best buddy?

- **SPED PT**
- **Confidence**

13. How, if at all, has this experience serving as a buddy impacted your thoughts about what you want to do beyond high school?

- **Eye opening**
- **Varying abilities**

14. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

- **Proud**
- **Heart-warming**

- **Eyes opened to**
- **Loud noises**
- **Sensitivities**
### Theme Development (Codes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>Theme Development Areas of Self-Growth</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Football game</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tailgate</td>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cheering</td>
<td>Eye-Opening</td>
<td>Pandemic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basketball game</td>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halloween social</td>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanging out</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Virtual Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little Notes</td>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Perception of SWD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holiday social</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>-Scared at first</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rewarding</td>
<td>-Unsure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Club Description</td>
<td>More outgoing</td>
<td>Awareness of club</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build connections</td>
<td>More accepting</td>
<td>School participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Future outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open mind</td>
<td>More comfortable</td>
<td>Program availability in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socials</td>
<td>Build connections</td>
<td>and beyond</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Get people in the door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>Appreciate the small things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impactful</td>
<td>Easier to interact with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn about others</td>
<td>Planning skills</td>
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<td>Make an impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
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<td>-More genuine</td>
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<td>-Non-biased</td>
<td>-Human</td>
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<td>-closer friendships</td>
<td>-Individuals</td>
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Appendix M

Theme Development with Codes and Significant Statements (Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Shared Experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes:</strong> Club Description, Development of Friendships</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Codes:</strong> Football game, tailgate, cheering, basketball game, Halloween social, hanging out, little notes, holiday social. Club description: build connections, learning, open mind, socials, fun, joyful, impact, learn about others, make an impact. Friendships: more genuine, non-biased, closer friendships, proud, non-judgmental, connection</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Significant Statements:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This school year has probably been the most impactful. I think because I've been more in charge of projects I have been on a lot more. Just involved in the past two years have been mostly a helper. But this year I've really been given the opportunity to take charge of certain projects and just socials and parties. And that's been something really just gratifying for me and made me feel that I have a lot bigger part in everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably cheering with them. We like put them up in stunts and stuff and just like to see them there. We had five of them come.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess probably just like the everyday like hanging out because it's on me to get to know the kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I personally, I think mine was the tailgate and watching the football game and they were getting very excited. So it was fun and meeting the parents too. Yeah, that was definitely exciting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's a very it's a very proud feeling at the end of the day, knowing that I not only…it's a heartwarming feeling. It's knowing that I were to walk in the club, not having a buddy, not knowing anybody, really, but walking out, knowing I have six buddies standing my hand like holding my hand, standing behind me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love that Best Buddies Club is just so welcoming. It is one of the most welcoming and open places you can be to meet new people and you'll get to know more about yourself and more people who just see the world so differently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really like the club because it gives me something to look forward to. Like during school, I can be like oh, I'm going to go hang out with some of peers that may not be able to...But it has really helped me like see people who are different from me and learn from people that go to my school, and I kind of like a hands-on experience, so I feel like that really helps me in that aspect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to Best Buddies Club!!! Come in with an open heart and an open mind, meet some of the best people you will ever know :) We are always looking to meet new friends at our holiday socials and love creating new memories during our practice of skills, you could make</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
these memories too! Join one of the most special, caring, and fulfilling clubs you will ever know!

It's been the best club I think I've ever been in and I've been in so many clubs all my four years, and it's definitely been the club that has made the most impact on me. And it's just such an amazing club. I could be having a bad day and I go to the social after school. I just go in her classroom and I'm just like, my day is turned around and its just so much better.

And I'd say that they grow closer friendships than I have with regular students in my grade because they always come up to me and they know almost everything about me, and they're just more able to reach out to me than a lot of people are. So I do like having them as friends, and they're not going to do anything that would make me upset and they're just always there.

You're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment.

Make new friends with some of the school’s best people and have lots of fun

I'd say becoming friends with my buddy, like he's so funny and he's so sweet. He's always there for you and you see my every sport of it. So he's always just someone to talk to get.

I'd say really like this buddies club. It's not just the club in general, because we do a lot more interactive, something like other schools and the buddies with us are a lot closer. And we have like stronger friendships that a lot of my friends at other schools just because we get to see each other a lot more. I have a lot of activities to do, like the dance and, yeah, the meetings, and we get to meet everyone, like when we had the like, when we got to find out everybody, that was fine. So, yeah, that was fun.

I'm most proud of being able to make my friends and meet my friends, I really they're... they're people I am going to remember after I graduated, I'm hoping when I do come back and visit later next year when I graduated, I just they're people that I'm going to remember and they're going to stick with me. And when it comes to the future, and I'm hoping and college to find another program that I can join so that I can be with me so I can still be involved with special ed and special occasion individuals. I just got all these friendships, and I really don't want to let all those go.

Well, like I said, I initially went into it very scared. I was definitely very just hesitant and just kind of like ignorant, but I didn't know and I love that Best Buddy's Club one is just so welcoming. It is one of the most welcoming and open places you can be to meet new people and you'll get to know more about yourself and more people who just see the world so differently. But in such a beautiful way, and you're able to just build these friendships that are more genuine, more real there and not blocked by barriers. They're not blocked by any judgment. They're just here and you're in the moment. I love the best place to connect me with other individuals like me who just want to you to help and want to do that. I've met so many of the people that are like my very close friends, and I've been able to spend time with them, and
I just feel like it's best buddy's club is a place to make connections. And that's a very good place to just learn more about yourself and about those who have so much love to give.

I love my buddy. I love being a buddy.

Being able to see them in the hallway and proudly stand up, have conversations with them and introduce my friends like to them and be like, this is my buddy.

Well, I'm so proud that I'm able to have so many more friendships with them and that they are always I can I always ask them after the parties, I always ask them if they have fun because that's like one of my main goals. I want them to have a really fun experience with other people. And yeah, just having them have fun and then then meeting new people as well. Because some of the buddies, I always encourage them to bring their friends as well. So more people keep coming to each event and then they know it's more people and my friends.

It’s a great place to make friends who are a little different than you.

This club creates life long friendships and makes you feel good knowing that you’re there to help.

Make amazing friendships

Make new friends with some of the schools best people and have lots of fun”

I am now friends with all the kids in my buddy’s class, and it always makes my day when I can see them.
## Appendix N

### Research Study Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (MCHS)</th>
<th>Consent Form</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>1:1 Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Writing Prompt</th>
<th>Member Checking</th>
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*e = electronic
using Adobe Sign