A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NINTH GRADE STUDENTS’ WITH DISABILITIES PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

by

Micole Atkins Talley

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

James Zabloski, Ed.D., Committee Chair

David Andrew Gorman, Ed.D., Committee Member

Jasolyn Henderson, Ph.D., Committee Member
ABSTRACT

Few research studies listened to the voices of high school students with disabilities’ regarding their lived experiences during placement in an inclusion setting and a resource setting. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the central phenomenon of the study for 10 ninth grade students with disabilities served in either an inclusive setting or a resource setting in 2 rural high schools located in Southeastern Georgia. The research design for this study is a qualitative, phenomenological because further exploration is needed to understand the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their instructional environments. The central research question was, “How do ninth grade students with disabilities describe their lived experiences, either in an inclusion setting or a resource setting?” The setting for this study was 2 high schools located in a small, rural school district in Southeastern United States. The forms of data collection were interviews, focus groups, and observations. The use of MAXqda and the constant comparative data analysis were chosen until data saturation was reached. The 3 themes were Teacher-student Relationships, Classroom Climate, and Perceived Teacher Efficacy.

Findings revealed the need for ninth graders’ input into their placement in instructional environments of inclusion and resource settings. The conclusion was that ninth grade SWD felt that they could learn in an inclusion setting with the effective implementation of instructional practices and teacher traits they associated with the resource setting. Further research could focus on how to increase the effectiveness of co-teaching models to emphasize a stronger focus on student learning outcomes and implement processes to include student in the IEP meetings to provide their input regarding their services.

Keywords: Constructivist theory, co-teaching models, inclusion, lived experiences, phenomenological, resource, special education
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all the students who have felt that they never had a voice. I want each of you to remember that your words, feelings and thoughts matter! Learn to advocate for yourself at all times and in every way!
Acknowledgments

First, I thank my Lord and Savior! For all that you have done, I am forever grateful! In Philippians 4:6, your word teaches me to not be anxious for anything but to make my requests to you through prayer and petition. I have made my requests and by your mercy and grace, I have achieved a monumental accomplishment. Lord, I will never have enough words to express my thanks to you. This journey has been long and difficult. However, you have been there to support me the entire time. Lord, I am so thankful for your enduring love.

First, I acknowledge my parents, Walter and Sarah. I want them to know that your ongoing prayers and words of encouragement have served as a wonderful foundation for all my life’s accomplishments. Thank you for your continuous examples of excellence and perseverance. I would have never been able to complete this journey without you both as examples.

To my son, Richard: Thank you for being my inspiration to be better. You are the most amazing person I know. I am anxiously waiting to see all that you will become. William Shakespeare said how I feel about you best, “When I saw you I fell in love, and you smiled because you knew.” I love you more than words can say.

To my daughter, Jasmine: You are brilliant and your light shines so brightly. I am blessed to have you in my world. Thank you for reminding me to never give up. You have triumphed over every obstacle that has ever blocked your way. I could not be more proud.

To my Dar: We have come so far by faith. God brought us together for so many reasons and we have supported each other through it all. Thank you for always being there and for taking this special journey with me.
To my honey: Thank you for being my constant cheerleader. Your encouragement and faith in me have helped me more than you will ever know.

To my special family members and friends: You all are “my village.” You have traveled this long path with me with as ever present supporters. Many times, each of you helped me to stand when I thought I might fall. I am unable to individually thank all of you but I want you to know that your love and commitment to my success mean the world to me. When I had difficult moments and felt discouraged, God moved each of you to call me, text me or pray on my behalf. Thank you so much!

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List of Abbreviations

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act (EAHCA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Students with Disabilities (SWD)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand and describe the phenomenon of the environmental classroom experiences for ninth grade students with disabilities served in an inclusive setting or a resource setting. The study occurred in a small rural school district at two high schools located in Southeastern Georgia. Currently, there is sparse research regarding how students with disabilities describe their lived experiences in a classroom environment, either in an inclusion setting or a resource setting (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011). Through much debate and educational reform, the idea of inclusion and resource settings from the perceptions of students with disabilities (SWD) generated the need for this study (Sosu, Mtika, & Colucci-Gray, 2010).

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), and a revised version of the EAHCA known as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004, mandated that SWD receive special education services in the least restrictive environment (Heward, 2013). Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) stipulates that SWD are educated in “instructional settings similar to the general educational classroom as possible in which an appropriate program can be provided and the child can make satisfactory educational progress” (Heward, 2013, p. 71).

The overview of Chapter one contains several subsections regarding the background of the problem, situation to self, the problem statement, the purpose statement, significance of the study, and a central question and three qualitative sub-questions. Other topics in this chapter include a list of terms and definitions that provide clarity to the reader and a chapter summary. The central research question is, “How do ninth grade students with disabilities describe their
lived experiences, either in an inclusion setting or a resource setting?” To better understand how SWD describe their lived experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting, three sub-questions were explored.

**Background**

Students who receive special education services can be served in several settings, such as inclusion, resource, or a combination of both, to best meet their academic needs based on their Individual Education Plans (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). In the late 1960s, laws were enacted that led to deinstitutionalization and provided rights and services to people with disabilities. This deinstitutionalization led to the increased placement of SWD in public schools (Harbour & Maulik, 2010). Prior to legislation forcing inclusive practices in schools, SWD were placed in institutions to be educated. The legislation was later changed causing students to be placed in neighborhood schools and eventually in the general education classroom, according to the requirements of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975).

Legislation that guides the education of SWD has been in place for four decades with the establishment of Public Law 94-142, known as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975). The intent of P.L. 94-142 was to provide clarity and direction for all public schools regarding the expectation that SWD be provided equal access to education (EAHCA, 1975). The name of EAHCA was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) during a reauthorization of the law in 1990. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that children, youth, and adults ages 3–21 with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate public school education through the development of an IEP in the least restrictive environment for each student.
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) mandates that SWD are educated in local neighborhood schools, with typically developing peers. Those students are provided access to the general education curriculum using the aids and supports needed to provide them with an equal education as nondisabled peers. In the fall of 2011, 95% of 6- to 21-year-old SWD were served in regular schools; three percent were served in a separate school for SWD; one percent were placed in regular private schools by their parents; and less than one percent each were served in one of the following environments: (a) in a separate residential facility, (b) in homebound or in a hospital, or (c) in a correctional facility (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The aim of the EAHCA (1975) was to encourage a better education for SWD and to ensure that they received a free appropriate public education. Under the IDEA (2004), SWD are entitled to equal access to a free education designed specifically to meet their individual needs in the least restrictive environment (Weber, 2012).

Prior to IDEA (2004), Congress estimated that millions of children with disabilities were denied access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) by not being allowed to attend public schools (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). Denying a student FAPE not only affects the child and family, but it harms society as a whole. “Every young person who does not graduate from high school represents a financial loss to the public of $209,000 over his or her lifetime” (Voice of Youth in Chicago Education, 2011, p. 22). This number includes higher public health costs, higher public assistance costs, and higher criminal justice costs (Voice of Youth in Chicago Education, 2011, p. 22).

Inclusion is an entitlement for individuals with disabilities that is guaranteed by federal law when an IEP committee deems the special education services appropriate (Obiakor, Harris,
Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). IDEA entitles children, adolescents, and adults, ages 3-21 to early intervention and special education services. Furthermore, IDEA guarantees children with disabilities the same access to education as children who do not have disabilities (Motwani, 2007). However, the concept of inclusion evolved with little or no effort to facilitate a functional environment for the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011).

In many cases, denying SWD the right to FAPE in the least restrictive environment causes parents and educators to believe that instruction of SWD was not a priority in schools (Aron & Loprest, 2012). In addition, the denial of a free appropriate public education hinders students’ ability to receive the same quality education as nondisabled peers (Angelides, Savva, & Hajisoteriou, 2012). As a result, several advocacy groups and legal cases caused many educators, parents, and legislators to demand changes in how SWD are educated in America’s public schools (Spence, 2010).

Before 1975, more than a million SWD were excluded from schools and approximately 3.5 million did not receive appropriate services (Freedman, 2013). In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was reauthorized and it provided educators with specific guidance regarding the expectations for instructional services for SWD. Although great progress was made in guaranteeing services for SWD during the past four decades, questions still remain about the extent to which those services are being provided in the least restrictive environment (Aron & Loprest, 2012). IDEA requires that:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled; and that…removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature…of the
disability is such that education in general education classrooms with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. ([20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114.])

The IDEA regulations further specify that a variety of alternative placements are available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2016). In the heart of the debate to find the best way to serve SWD, valuable information is needed from students because they are the individuals most greatly impacted by the experience of being placed in a special education program. Approximately 6.4 million students, or 13.1% of the student population receive special education and related services in public schools each year (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a).

Typically, SWD are enrolled in neighborhood schools, and the majority spend most of the day in a general education classroom known as an inclusion setting (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b). While SWD require a diverse array of services to help them fully access the general education curriculum, most of them can achieve the same academic outcomes as nondisabled peers (Quenemoen, 2009). Lamport, Graves, & Ward (2012) found that the general education classroom provides the most practical learning environment for students with specific learning disabilities to gain the content subject matter necessary for success in high school and beyond. However, some students with specific learning disabilities still find themselves in resource classrooms taught by special education teachers who may or may not possess the content knowledge of the general education teacher and therefore, do not receive the same curriculum as nondisabled students (Lamport et al., 2012).
In recent decades, educators teaching in public schools encounter the greater needs of diverse student populations, with varying cognitive abilities, maturity levels, and academic strengths and weaknesses (Chen, 2016). Subsequently, student services outside of the general education classroom in a resource classroom has increased (Dalien, 2014). General education classrooms range from 20 to 30 students, on average, which means that children spend the majority of each school day with a group of their peers. General education teachers have stated that they were unable to provide individualized support to SWD without neglecting general education students (Nichols et al., 2010; Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011). Currently, most typical elementary, middle, and high school SWD are immersed in a larger than usual general education inclusion classroom with one lead teacher and one special education teacher. The other commonly used setting is the resource classroom that provides alternative settings for enhanced academic support for children whose needs cannot be fully met in a general education classroom (Chen, 2016).

For SWD, a large classroom setting can become overwhelming and possibly cause them to fall behind in their learning and work (Dalien, 2014). The resource classroom focuses on the idea of smaller groups, a more close-knit environment, and one-on-one attention, which can help children with disabilities feel safe while fostering creativity and learning. Unlike standard classrooms with a large number of peers, resource classrooms are typically smaller settings with a fewer number of students (Chen, 2016). Created to help foster enhanced support for SWD or specific difficulties, resource rooms are generally comprised of about 10 students who are instructed by a lead teacher with a certification in special education. Resource classrooms also often have at least one paraeducator who provides instructional support under the guidance of the classroom teacher (Chen, 2016; Dalien, 2014).
Resource classrooms can consist of a specific group of children who all have the same disability or learning needs, or can be a mixed group with unique abilities (Dalien, 2014). This alternative form of classroom setting provides support and structure for children whose educational needs are not met by a general education teacher, and is a choice for schools with a special education program (Dalien, 2014). SWD may also receive services in an inclusion setting as one where two teachers are in the classroom (Lamport et al., 2012; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). The inclusion class size is larger than what many SWD are accustomed to in a smaller resource classroom setting (Lamport et al., 2012).

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that the percentage of students with specific learning disability disabilities who spend more than 60% of the school day in resource classrooms was 48%. However, some students with specific learning disabilities are removed up to 80% of the time. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012) show that many of those SWD are removed from general education and placed in resource classrooms. Those statistics support the need for further investigation into the relationship between teachers’ attitudes and knowledge of SWD. The overabundance of SWD who are placed in resource classrooms for over half of the school day is directly related to recommendation made by teachers. Therefore, research is needed to understand teacher attitudes concerning SWD and how those attitudes may impact their placement recommendations (Everett, 2015).

Nationwide, about 60% of SWD spend at least 80% of instructional time in general education classrooms (Freedman, 2013). At the systems level, school districts implement formal and informal policies that dictate the content to be taught and the contexts in which instruction is provided. Often, the rigor of the standards-based general curriculum is used as a justification for
placing SWD in both settings. However, students are taught standards through decontextualized instruction in isolated settings rather than being involved in the full general curriculum, as required by the law (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). When SWD are included, not only does achievement rise, but learning opportunities are strengthened for all (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2008).

Moving from effectively including one student or creating one effective inclusive classroom team to overall inclusive practices in a school requires purposeful attention to building and maintaining a sense of belonging for SWD, their nondisabled peers, and for teachers and staff (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Additionally, it is unlikely that placement in a resource special education classroom rather than an inclusive setting may afford meaningful opportunities to learn to function in general education settings and activities consistently (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011).

The basic theoretical concept of including SWD in instructional environments with nondisabled peers aligns directly with Vygotsky’s constructivist theory (1978). The concept of inclusion emanated from the teachings of Vygotsky, a theorist, who taught that communication and interaction influenced individuals’ growth and development (Vygotsky, 1962). Therefore, limited interaction resulted in limited growth. Vygotsky theorized that individuals are developed by interacting with others and then by mastering skills and acquiring knowledge through repeated exposure that changes thinking and behavior (Vygotsky, 1987).

**Situation to Self**

It is my personal belief that the concept of equal educational opportunities for SWD is an important one because it has a significant impact on all students in a school. Many problems in society stem from a lack of tolerance and understanding of differences among individuals.
Teachers and students enter the classroom with their personal biases that are developed by their upbringing and life experiences. Over time, I have learned that when general education students are given the opportunity to interact from the beginning of their educational careers with SWD, many students become more tolerant and accepting of each other. This belief is philosophical in nature and based on the ideal that morals and values are directly impacted by my upbringing and environment.

As an educator with over 20 years of experience, I have a well-established educational philosophy. I simply believe that all students can learn with the appropriate support and resources in a safe and inclusive environment. A truly inclusive environment is not created indiscriminately. In fact, the structure and implementation of including all students in an instructional setting while addressing all of their needs is a monumental task. I believe that a productive inclusive instructional setting is attainable when all school stakeholders work collaboratively towards this mutually agreed upon goal.

This study’s guiding paradigm was constructivism (Vygotsky, 1987). Constructivism is a theory involving how individuals learn through social context and their progress in this area impacts their overall development (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Learning alongside SWD may help general education students understand the essence of individuals’ lived experiences in an environmental setting of inclusion or resource with an open mind. My conviction is based on the ideal that morals and values are directly impacted by one’s environment.

For the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study, I attempted to understand and describe the perceptions of the environmental settings of ninth grade SWD served in either an inclusive or resource setting. First, I defined in greater depth the problem I wanted to solve, and second, I chose to explore some of the theoretical methods using qualitative research to
better guide my efforts. At the same time, I brought to the study my world views that ultimately shaped the direction of this study.

**Problem Statement**

The general problem is that little research has thoroughly explored students’ with disabilities perceptions regarding their placement in inclusive settings and resource settings (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). The specific problem is understanding the perceptions of SWD, who receive special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting. There is a gap in the literature regarding the viewpoints of SWD about their placement in instructional settings (e.g., inclusion classrooms vs. resource classrooms).

There are few peer-reviewed studies on children’s ideas on how to include classmates with learning or intellectual disabilities into inclusion classrooms with nondisabled peers (Nowicki & Brown, 2013). Furthermore, there is sparse research giving a voice to SWD on their placement which is usually determined during Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. To address this gap in the literature, SWD were invited to share their voices on the topic. The findings of this study may contribute to the body of literature regarding students’ with disabilities perceptions of their learning environments. The problem is lack of research on the perceptions of SWD who receive special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to understand and describe the lived experiences of 10 ninth grade SWD who receive special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting from a small rural school district at two high schools located in Southeastern Georgia. The environmental setting is defined as special education that is designed to ensure that SWD are provided instruction in an environment that allows them to be educated
in the least restrictive environment (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Children requiring special education services must be provided instruction with nondisabled children to the maximum extent possible in an appropriate program to meet their special needs (Taylor, 2011).

Vygotsky’s view of learning as a social construct or ideal provided the basis for the theory guiding this study. In the constructivist theory, children learn actively and through hands-on experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Parents, caregivers, educators, and peers influence a child’s development. Vygotsky called the domain of cognitive development from where a child begins to where he or she could progress to with scaffolding, the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Yasnitsky, 2010; Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2015). The concept of scaffolding is linked with ZPD, as it allows for support of the child until such time that he or she can function independently in applying new skills or knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD explains the ability of children to perform at a higher level with the aid of peers or adults than they can independently (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is useful in appropriately directing instruction toward children’s developing capabilities. Learning directed at a person’s current developmental level is ineffective, as its focus is on skills and knowledge that have already been mastered (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Significance of the Study**

Students with disabilities rarely experience the opportunity to express how they feel about their placement in either an inclusive setting or a resource setting. The perceptions of ninth grade students regarding their environments in special education in this study completed a step in the right direction to encourage other researchers to allow SWD to have a voice and input in their placement and settings. The students who are served in inclusion classes and resource classes added to the information and insight into settings, as well as, provided valuable
information to help schools address the distinct educational needs of SWD. This study may provide information to improve the overall learning environment (i.e., inclusion and resource) within high schools as the foundation for improving student achievement among SWD (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011).

Sparse qualitative studies exist that explore the voices of SWD served in the inclusive and resource setting (Barton, 2016; Hannes, Von Arx, Christiaens Heyvaert, & Petry, 2012; Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgen, 1998; Pugach & Wesson, 1995; Vaughn & Bos, 1987; Wang & Birch, 1984). Students are the most important stakeholders in the education process, therefore their opinions should be considered by educators and parents. For this reason, the current research makes a significant contribution to the literature and provides a foundation for further research on the effective provision of services to SWD.

The Classroom and School Practice project of the European Agency focused on revealing, analyzing, describing, and disseminating apparently successful classroom practices in inclusive settings. The project was divided into two phases investigating elementary and secondary education (Meijer, 2003, 2005). The focus for the study was the work of teachers. However, it was also recognized that teachers mainly learn and develop their practice as a result of input from significant key people in their immediate environment (e.g., the head teacher, colleagues, and professionals in or around the school). These were the professionals who are considered to be the main target groups for Meijer’s (2010) study.

The main task of Meijer’s (2010) study was to provide key people with knowledge about possible strategies for handling differences in the classroom and school, and to inform them about the conditions necessary for the successful implementation of these strategies (Meijer, 2010). The project attempted to answer key questions concerning inclusive education. In the
first example, it was argued that an understanding of what works within inclusive settings was necessary. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of how inclusive education works was also needed. Third, it was important to know why it is working as the conditions for implementation (Meijer, 2010).

Meijer’s (2010) study consists of three phases. In the first phase, literature reviews were conducted in the participating countries to reveal the current state of the art of effective inclusive practices. This part of the project addressed the question: Which practices had proven to be effective in inclusive education? In the second phase, concrete examples of good practices were selected and described in a systematic way. In the final phase, exchanges between different countries were organized so that the transfer of knowledge and practices were maximized (Meijer, 2010).

The first main conclusion was inclusive classrooms exist throughout European countries (Meijer, 2010). The evidence also suggested that what is good for students with special educational needs (SEN), was also good for all students. A second significant finding was that behavior, social and/or emotional problems were the most challenging within the area of inclusion of SEN. An important main finding was dealing with differences or diversity in the classroom, which was one of the biggest problems within European classrooms (Meijer, 2010).

One of many goals of special education is to give SWD the opportunity to participate in the least restrictive environment so that they receive as much content instruction as possible with nondisabled students (Lamport, Graves, & Ward, 2012). There are many strategies and models school systems use to ensure SWD participate within the general education classroom setting (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015). However, the inclusion model seems to be the most beneficial in the areas of academic achievement and social interaction. The inclusion model centers on
educating SWD in the general education setting along with nondisabled peers. General education teachers have concerns about teaching SWD (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015). Some of those concerns for general education teachers include lack of training regarding instructional strategies for teaching SWD, providing planning time, and resources (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Sosu et al., 2010; Yang & Rusli, 2012).

Research is essential to demonstrate how the inclusion model can have a positive impact on academic achievement and social interaction among SWD (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Lamport et al., 2012).

Carter and Hughes (2005) conducted a review of empirical investigations on “the efficacy of interventions directed at increasing social interaction among adolescents with intellectual disabilities and their general education peers in secondary schools” (p. 180). The sample population included adolescents with intellectual disabilities receiving special education services in the secondary school system. Carter and Hughes’ study involved skill-based interventions focused on increasing social interaction with peers, and support-based interventions focused on structuring the school environment to support peer interactions (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Findings showed skill-based and support-based interventions were effective at increasing peer interaction across participants with a range of intellectual disabilities. However, differential effects were noted for several types of interventions by severity (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Other findings showed communication book instruction, social interaction skill instruction, and peer support arrangements were “most effective for participants with severe intellectual disabilities, whereas general education participation and the assignment of roles to general education peers were most effective for participants with moderate disabilities” (Carter & Hughes, 2005, p. 186).
Students’ with specific learning disabilities perceptions of their educational experiences are critical to effectively evaluate the differences between teaching students in inclusive general education settings and resource settings (Obiakor et al., 2012). Students’ with disabilities perceptions also provide invaluable insight into reasons why either inclusive or resource placements are or are not more appealing. Their feedback and viewpoints may provide educators with information needed to help modify and improve upon existing programs. Individual Education Plan team placement decisions are driven by the established programs within school districts and schools, as well as parent and teacher input (Obiakor et al., 2012). The student’s role in the process is minimized and his or her ability to self-advocate is greatly reduced.

The results of this study may provide useful information for educators to identify and develop programs that resolve possible obstacles to student achievement (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Yang & Rusli, 2012). Understanding the experiences and perceptions of SWD helps to provide administrators and teachers with crucial insight necessary for adequate program design. The results of this study may also provide insight to guide the preparation and revisions of teacher education programs for preservice teachers. Additionally, the study results may help to close the gap created by the void of research in the literature on SWD perceptions of their educational settings.

The understanding of student views empowers educators to meet the needs of SWD more effectively. Weaknesses found within both settings can be effectively used to restructure service models overall. Analyzing student perceptions gives rise to student voices and enables students to become a part of their learning process. However, careful consideration must be given to ensure that student voices are heard in the proper place. Student perceptions, knowledge and attitudes must be balanced in light of the educational research regarding the resource educational
setting. Student perceived benefits enable educators to continue to improve and uphold the strengths of the special education program. Students’ with disabilities perceptions of their educational settings provide valid and relevant feedback concerning needed improvements in the service delivery models that adults may not have ever considered.

When SWD are served in resource classrooms away from their peers, students’ lived experiences of their classroom settings can be compromised often making it difficult to benefit from instruction and progress academically in the core curriculum (Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011). Being educated in an inclusive setting with their nondisabled peers gives students with specific learning disabilities an opportunity to receive an appropriate level of support and services from special education teachers so they are able to fully access the curriculum (Lamport et al., 2012; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). Research shows student perceptions of their learning environments are a strong indicator of student success and motivation (Anderman et al., 2011).

**Research Questions**

To better understand how SWD describe their lived experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting, three sub-questions were explored. The central research question was, “How do ninth grade students with disabilities describe their lived experiences, either in an inclusion setting or a resource setting?”

**SQ1:** *How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings?* Implementing the least restrictive environment (LRE) in the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms is part of Vygotsky’s teachings that influenced changes in special education practices (Horn & Banerjee, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011).

**SQ2:** *How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive similarities and differences in an inclusive classroom setting and a resource setting?* In inclusive classrooms where SWD are
served with general education students, they may have a variety of lived experiences related to differences and similarities between the two settings. As a result, SWD may not be accepted by general education students in the inclusion setting because general education students may have little tolerance for SWD in the same classroom with them (Ryan, 2010). General education students do not always understand or accept the presence of SWD within the same classroom setting (De Boer et al., 2010). Sometimes, teachers may inadvertently convey some negative behaviors toward SWD, for example, keeping their distance from them, and displaying non-verbal cues (De Boer et al., 2010).

SQ3: *What factors, if any, impact ninth grade students’ with disabilities experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting?* The inclusion model occurs in a classroom where both SWD and their nondisabled peers are taught the same curriculum in a general education setting (Lamport et al., 2012; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). This type of inclusion model is based on the theoretical framework of Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist theory which is built upon the fundamental role of social interaction in the cognitive development of students.

**Definitions**

The following definitions are operationally defined to provide clarity for the reader:

1. *Alternative teaching* - Alternative teaching means one teacher works with most students while the other works with a small group for remediation, enrichment, assessment, pre-teaching, or another purpose (Friend et al., 2010).

2. *Bracketing* - Bracketing is suspending, setting aside our biases, daily understandings, theories, beliefs, habitual modes of thought, and judgments. For example, analyses of cause and effect must be bracketed to understand the phenomenon as it shows itself. Part of the larger process of epoche’ (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).
3. **Collaboration** - Collaboration is preferred that co-teaching is collaborative. But collaboration is far more than co-teaching. Collaboration refers to how individuals interact, not the activity they are doing. Thus, any activity, co-teaching, problem solving, consultation, may or may not be collaborative (Friend, 2016).

4. **Co-teaching** - Co-teaching is a service delivery option. Co-teaching exists as a means for providing the specialized instruction to which students with disabilities, those who are English language learners, or who have other special needs are entitled while ensuring access to general curriculum in the least restrictive environment with the provision of supplementary aids and services (Friend, 2016).

5. **Epoche** - Epoche is learning to look at things in a way such that what is seen is only what stands before our eyes; only what can be described and defined. This observation is an attempt to suspend any and all beliefs observed and listened as an attempt to minimize interpretation (Chan et al., 2013).

6. **Free appropriate public education** - Free appropriate public education is the “requirement that a school district provide instruction, classroom supports and related services to appropriate to meet the individual need of each qualified person with a disability who is in the school district’s jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the person’s disability” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 12).

7. **General education class** - General education class includes students who receive the majority of their education program in a general education classroom and receive special education and related services outside the general education classroom for “less than 21% of the school day” (Office of Special Education Programs, 1994, p. 12).
8. **Inclusion** - Inclusion means children of all abilities learning, playing, and working together in the same classroom (Center for Inclusive Child Care, 2015). Inclusion is a popular philosophical position based upon the assumption that educators should return to one educational system for all students who are entitled to an instructional program which meets his or her individual needs and learning characteristics (Rogers, 2011).

9. **Individualized education plan** - An individualized education plan (IEP) is the document developed at an IEP meeting which sets the standards by which subsequent special education services are usually determined appropriate (Rogers, 2011).

10. **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** - The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and 1997 is the federal law that addresses intervention services for children. It requires students to are provided services in their least restrictive environment. Each state passes its own additional law and writes rules to be followed in carrying out federal law (Center for Inclusive Child Care, 2015).

11. **Mainstreaming** - Mainstreaming means providing any services, including education, for children with disabilities, in a setting with nondisabled peers – benefiting all children (Center for Inclusive Child Care, 2015).

12. **One teach, one assist** - One teach, one assist involves one teacher leads instruction while the other circulates among the students offering individual assistance (Friend et al., 2010).

13. **One teach, one observe** - One teach, one observe teaching includes one teacher leads large-group instruction while the other gathers academic, behavioral, or social data on specific students or the class group (Friend et al., 2010).
14. *Parallel teaching* - Parallel teaching consists of two teachers, each with half the class group, present the same material for the primary purpose of fostering instructional differentiation and increasing student participation (Friend et al., 2010).

15. *Phenomenological study* - A phenomenological study is the study of lived experiences and the ways those experiences are understood to develop a world view (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 104).

16. *Placement* - Placement is the setting in which the special education service is delivered to the student and derived from the student’s IEP (Rogers, 2011).

17. *Resource room* - A resource room is a centralized classroom where appropriate materials are housed for a licensed special education teacher who works with students with disabilities and acts as a consultant to other teachers. In addition, the resource room contains materials and the teacher uses methods to help children having challenges within the general education classroom (Center for Inclusive Child Care, 2015). The resource room includes students who receive “special education and related services outside the general education classroom for at least 21% but no more than 60% of the school day” (Office of Special Education Programs, 1994, p. 12).

18. *Resource* - Resource placement is when a child spends at least half of the school day in special education and the other half in general education classrooms with nondisabled peers (Rogers, 2011).

19. *Self-contained class* - A self-contained class includes students who receive special education and “related services outside the general education classroom for more than 60% of the school day” (Office of Special Education Programs, 1994, p. 12). By definition, the students in the current study are served in self-contained classes.
20. **Special education** - Special education means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents or guardians, to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability, including classroom instruction, instruction in physical education, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975, p. 784, Sec. 4. (a) Section 602 of the Act (20 U.S.C. 1402).

21. **Station teaching** - Station teaching involves instruction divided into three or more non-sequential parts and students, likewise divided into three or more groups that rotate between stations, being taught by the teachers at two stations and working independently at the others (Friend et al., 2010).

22. **Team teaching** - Team teaching consists of two teachers leading large group instruction, for example, by lecturing, representing opposing views in a debate, and illustrating two ways to solve a problem (Friend et al., 2010). Team teaching is often used to describe when two general education teachers combine classes and share instruction. (Friend, 2016).

23. **Teacher self-efficacy** - Teacher self-efficacy is the belief that teachers have about their abilities and skills as educators. Teacher self-efficacy has been shown to be an important characteristic of the teacher and one strongly related to success in teaching (Slovak, 2010).

**Summary**

Through much debate and educational reform, lack of research regarding the perceptions of ninth grade SWD of an inclusive or resource setting generated the need for this study (Sosu et al., 2010). Chapter one presented the purpose of the study which is to explore ninth grade SWD lived experiences who are served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting. The background
of the study, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study were described. The overarching research question was, “How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their classroom experiences in an inclusive setting and a resource setting?” Three sub-questions were developed. Chapter two presents a review of the literature of studies showing descriptions of ninth grade students’ with disabilities lived experiences regarding educational settings (i.e., inclusion and resource) in which they are placed every day.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two presents the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter includes a review of the related literature consisting of a brief history of inclusion, professional responsibilities of general education and special education teachers. The chapter also reviews the placement debate regarding the appropriateness of resource classes for some SWD, perceptions of inclusion, teacher efficacy, and preservice teachers’ training programs. In the review of literature section entitled, “Perceptions of Inclusion”, many stakeholders’ perceptions about inclusion are explored. However, few studies were found showing descriptions of ninth grade students with disabilities’ lived experiences regarding their educational settings.

Theoretical Framework

The work of Vygotsky was selected as the theoretical framework for this descriptive, transcendental phenomenological study because his constructivist theory greatly influences special education practices (1962, 1978, and 1987). Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) support the constructivist theory of Vygotsky’s that postulates social interactions and context directly impact a person’s ability to function in society. Lev Vygotsky (1962) was a notable Russian psychologist in the early 1930s. His theory is linked to the social nature of learning.

In his book, Mind in Society, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that “all learners are not simply passive recipients but are born with tools to assist in their growth on a continuum of socialization” (p. 86). Vygotsky asserts that development cannot be separated from its social context. Vygotsky (1987) notes three active elements are needed to ensure that learning takes place: (a) active learners, (b) active teachers, and (c) active social environments. All three
elements must come together in the classroom allowing students to relate to or, at least, become aware of their own and their peers’ thinking.

Vygotsky (1987) generated three specific ideas that align with LRE and inclusion: (a) classroom culture, (b) social speech, and (c) the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The classroom culture and climate is the environment where students develop cognitively through social interactions. He believed learning cannot be developed autonomously by the student, but through social interactions with other students. Language is an indication of the student’s learning abilities, which can be emphasized in three stages. The first stage is social speech where children exhibit the need to belong. The second stage is egocentric speech where children learn to speak to become part of their environment. The third stage is inner speech when children begin to internalize thinking. Vygotsky developed the principle of the ZPD, which emphasizes that a child’s development level is accomplished when engaged in social behavior. The zone of proximal development highlights two principles: (a) Cognition is based upon a range at any corresponding age, and (b) cognitive development is based upon social interactions (Vygotsky, 1962).

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the ZPD posits that human potential is theoretically limitless. However, the practical limits of human potential depend upon quality social interactions and residential environment. This ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving. The level of potential development is determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 85).

In support of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory, Gredler (2009) noted learning is a systematic mastering of an individual’s thinking. Vygotsky’s (1978) view of cognitive development and the
central framework of his theory are the stages of concept development. Those stages are self-regulation and mastery of a child’s thinking that culminate in the development of higher cognitive functions. This mastery of thinking is influenced by the social interaction a child experiences, which ultimately impact cognitive thinking and behavior. The teachings of Vygotsky are important in the field of special education because different strategies challenge the idea that perceived differences of children’s thoughts require separation in instructional settings (e.g., inclusion and resource). The theoretical framework for the development of the inclusion model of service for special education has its roots in the constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1987). Child development, according to this theory, indicates that each stage is linked to behavior.

For Vygotsky, concept formation is a dynamic, ever-changing activity during which:

The child relies on his or her perception to make sense of objects that appear to them to be unrelated. The child creates his or her subjective relationships between objects and then mistakes his or her egocentric perspective for reality. (Vygotsky, 1962, pp. 199-200)

This stage of development is known as inherent coherence. Vygotsky says, “Incoherent coherence occurs when the making of mistakes is an integral part of a child’s development” (Vygotsky, 1962, pp. 199-200).

**Related Literature**

Students with disabilities were not always allowed to interact and learn with general education peers (Lamport et al., 2012). Educational reform, legislative mandates, and the standardized testing movement, which are interconnected to some extent, prompted a paradigm shift in education. This paradigm also brought about changes regarding instructional practices
for SWD (Akalin, Sazak-Pinar, & Sucuoglu, 2010). Students with disabilities are now educated in the general education classroom far more frequently, which has created new challenges for school personnel (Akalin et al., 2010; Friend & Cook, 2017; Friend, Cook, Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Lamport et al., 2012). The literature review revealed advantages and disadvantages to service models in education. However, additional research is needed to determine what changes should be made to promote the advantages and reduce the impact of the disadvantages (Friend et al., 2010).

**Historical Perspective of Inclusion**

Officials in many school systems adopted the inclusion model as a method to ensure that IDEIA (2004) and NCLB (2002) requirements were implemented. The term *inclusion* replaced previous terminologies (e.g., integrated special education and reverse mainstreaming) prior to the early 1990s. Inclusion means more than placing students with special needs in the general educational classroom, but also intentionally promoting a sense of belonging, social relationships, and academic development and learning (Odom et al., 2011).

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) requires American school systems to examine how to best address the needs of SWD based on academic achievement. This trend “shifted the instructional focus with regard to SWD from where they will be educated to how they are educated” (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009, p. 494). “Districts and schools have struggled to overcome a history of a separate and isolated special education system, and for various reasons, efforts to include SWD in general education have not always been successful” (Calabrese, Patterson, Liu, Goodvin, & Hummel, 2008, p. 62).
The inclusion method is a basic model where both SWD and their nondisabled peers are educated within the same classroom (Angelides et al., 2012). Educational inclusion, then, offers education geared to include all students, even those with disabilities in the same learning environment. This may include SWD who have emotional and/or behavioral problems (Lamport, Graves, & Ward, 2012). Teachers may encounter a variety of students in the classroom, including those with learning disorders, emotional disabilities, and mildly or moderately intellectually disabled. Students with disabilities are placed in the regular education classroom and are involved in instructional settings that may include the general education teacher, the special education teacher, the teacher assistant and possibly parental or community volunteers within the same setting (Wiebe & Kim, 2008). The most popular inclusion method is the co-teaching model (Friend, 2016).

According to Friend et al. (2010):

Co-teaching is defined as the partnership of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs, in a general education setting, and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs. (p. 241)

Inclusion of all children within the classroom presents new challenges for general education teachers (Lamport et al., 2012). The average class may consist of gifted children, SWD, English language learners, and low socioeconomically status children. With diversity, classroom management and planning for instruction to meet the needs of all students can be a difficult task for teachers. State and federal education systems are demanding that schools improve special education services. As a result, many school districts resort to the inclusion of
special education students in the general education classroom setting as a solution to meet those demands (Lamport et al., 2012). However, educating students inclusively can be a commanding means of unifying SWD and their nondisabled peers within the same classroom (Mowat, 2010). Yet, new problems sometimes arise when SWD and their nondisabled peers are combined in the general education classroom (Lamport et al., 2012).

**Free Appropriate Public Education**

The inclusion of SWD in classrooms with nondisabled peers evolved over many years (Mowat, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), approximately 95% of special education SWD receive special education services in general education classes for at least 80% of the day. This represents a drastic increase since 1975, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA, P.L. 94-142) mandated that states provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students, including those with physical, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities (Aldabas, 2015). The act further outlined that the education must be appropriate to meet the students’ needs. In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) expanded special education services that required all children with disabilities between the ages of three and 21 years are entitled to FAPE in the least restrictive environment (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

The historical, social, and theoretical contexts for the idea of providing students with FAPE emerged from many historians and researchers who concurred that the *Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley* Supreme Court case decision was important in relation to FAPE and still impacts legislations and educational reform today (Weber, 2012). The ruling in the Rowley case was interpreted to create an operation definition for FAPE (Weber, 2012).
The decision in the Rowley case is considered the basis for FAPE, which is the foundation of special education laws such as IDEA (Weber, 2012). Students with disabilities (SWD) are provided specific services by school district officials who are supposed to ensure that SWD receive FAPE (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). Noncompliance to IDEA is devastating to school districts because its mandates are associated with the federal funding that most districts need to function (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012).

With the continuous evolution of reform in special education, Congress historically uses case law to reexamine the elements that constitute FAPE and the specific provisions of IDEA. IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and 2004. The changes to the law now include indicators relating to student performance and academic progress. IDEA also addresses participation in standardized state testing (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012).

No Child Left Behind Act

As the educational setting in America continues to change, reforms impact special education practices even more. The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) generated further reform because of its mandates for accountability (McFarlane, 2012; Weber, 2012). This law creates benchmarks that states and school districts demonstrate adequate progress for all students. The inclusion of the progress of SWD for meeting the standards of adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the auspices of NCLB (2002) forced educators to reexamine how they teach SWD (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009). An increase of the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms caused a surge in educators’ expectations of increased student access to the general curriculum with the accountability of achieving improved learning outcomes (Horn & Banerjee, 2009).
Every Student Succeeds Act

President Barack Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that replaced the NCLB Act of 2002. To relieve states of rigorous accountability and to allow flexibility in helping to ensure that all students succeed, President Obama signed the ESSA into law on December 10, 2015. Accountability and flexibility allowed states to develop quality programs for students, increase equity among students from affluent and less affluent homes, and the close achievement gaps while increasing positive outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

President Barack Obama’s vision was to provide protection for those children who are less affluent and considered children of poverty in America’s public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For the first time in public education, the ESSA law mandated that all students in the United States are taught by highly qualified teachers and high academic standards would prepare them to experience success in college and careers into adulthood. Annual statewide assessments were developed and administered to K-12 students in America to measure their progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

As a result, this information about student progress was made available to stakeholders such as communities, administrators, teachers, parents, and students to show that students were progressing towards high standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition to K-12 public education, children in pre-school had access to high quality teachers and standards through the ESSA. This law has high expectations of America’s lowest-performing schools. Simply because many low-performing schools are located in poverty-ridden communities and minority children generally reside in those communities and attend those schools does not mean that those children cannot learn. In those schools, ESSA law maintains and sustains high
expectations from administrators, teachers, and parents that those children succeed and graduate from high school at successful high rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The mandates of ESSA, similar to previous legislation, continue the need for educators to determine the most effective way to provide FAPE to all students in America’s public schools.

**Placement Debate Regarding Appropriateness of Resource Classes**

Legislative regulations encourage a school climate that promotes inclusive educational practices for SWD (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012). There is an ongoing debate regarding the appropriateness of resource classes for some SWD (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Educators and parents are concerned because previous research indicated that students placed in self-contained and resource settings did not demonstrate expected levels of progress (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011).

Others acknowledge that students in some cases are given the opportunity to learn more in a resource environment due to the specialized training that special education teachers in these classes usually receive (Causton-Theoharisis et al., 2011). Proponents of resource placements claim that special education teachers were unable to be effective when they were asked to support students in inclusive settings because of barrier issues like class size and inability to give intensive instruction for skill mastery (Maggin et al., 2011). Simultaneously, stakeholders who support inclusive practices continue to emphasize previous research legitimizing its benefits. Smith, Robb, West, and Tyler (2010) asserted that the importance of strong leadership and preservice training for general education teachers were necessary to promote effective inclusive practices.
Inclusive Classrooms

In inclusive classrooms, the learning environment oftentimes include SWD who have a range of learning and behavioral differences (Lamport et al., 2012). An inclusion classroom includes the general education teacher and the special education teacher as certified instructors. In some inclusion classrooms, there is also a teacher assistant and sometimes parent or community volunteers or a variation of these (Lamport et al., 2012; Wiebe & Kim, 2008).

Akalin and Sucuogluo (2015) provided information on teachers and classroom management in inclusive classrooms. Akalin and Sucuoglu explained, “In Turkey, the law mandating that children with disabilities are placed in general classrooms was accepted in 1983 and mainstreaming has been expanding throughout Turkey since then” (p. 65). However, some general education teachers were not adequately trained to provide accommodations or modifications to adhere to this mandate. Akalin and Sucuoglu stated, “The effectiveness of mainstreaming was questioned in the light of the problems being encountered by the children, their parents and especially the teachers since 1990” (p. 65).

While the majority of research was related to the effectiveness of services in inclusion settings for students of school age, few studies have investigated the impact of inclusion educational services on long-term outcomes for students with significant disabilities (Ryndak, Alper, Storch, & Montgomery, 2010). Ryndak et al. (2010) described how two brothers with significant disabilities and with a 10-year age difference functioned in their natural settings. The siblings, as young adults, received services in the same rural one-building district. The older brother received special education services in self-contained settings throughout his school career, while the younger brother received special education services in inclusive settings (Ryndak et al., 2010). Qualitative data were collected through records, interviews, and field
notes of observations. Findings showed that the brother who received special education services in the school’s inclusive general education settings achieved more positive long-term outcomes (Ryndak et al., 2010).

**Definition of co-teaching.** Co-teaching is the most commonly used approach to provide instruction in inclusion classrooms. Several definitions surfaced regarding what co-teaching means in an inclusive classroom. Friend (2016) defined co-teaching as a combination of a general education and special education teachers providing instruction in the classroom to SWD and their nondisabled peers using the same curriculum. Both teachers plan instruction in a collaborative effort as all students learn together using a variety of co-teaching approaches. Friend et al. (2010) define co-teaching as:

> Co-teaching is defined as the partnering of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including students with disabilities, in a general education setting and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs. (p. 11)

Co-teaching is also implemented for students who are English language learners (Bahamonde & Friend, 1999; Pardini, 2006); gifted or talented (Hughes & Murawski, 2001); and as an alternative approach to student teaching where the teacher and the student teacher plan lessons collaboratively (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008).

Administrators should ensure that general education and special education teachers are familiar with the most common co-teaching approaches: Alternative Teaching, One Teach–One Observe, One Teach–One Assist, Parallel Teaching, Station Teaching, and Team Teaching (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). Ongoing professional development should be available to
teachers who co-teach. Special education teachers should be able to clearly articulate areas of expertise and know how to provide specialized instruction in the curriculum while in the general education class without becoming an assistant teacher (Murawski, 2009). Paraprofessionals and even volunteers should also have training on their role in the inclusive classroom (Nevin, Villa, & Thousand, 2009). Training and professional development are needed because it cannot be assumed that general education and special education teachers already know their roles or are experts in co-teaching and inclusion instructional practices (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016).

**Collaborative teaching.** In the past, teachers worked in isolation, or one teacher to a classroom. As children with disabilities entered the public schools in the 1970s, they were taught in separate classrooms or schools with special education teachers. Over the past 25 years, those students gradually moved into the general education classroom. Hence the use of the term *mainstreaming* or *inclusion*, became the norm. However, students are included in general education classrooms for selected subjects or parts of the day, as they are not usually considered part of the typical class (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013).

Presently, the philosophy is to include all students in the same class, which has brought about teams of general education teachers and special education teachers working collaboratively or cooperatively to combine their professional knowledge, perspectives, and skills to teach as diverse group of students, including SWD (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013). The biggest challenge for educators has been deciding how to share the role that has traditionally been assigned to individual teachers in an inclusive setting. Teachers must be able to share goals, decisions, classroom instruction, responsibility for students, assessment of student learning, problem solving, and classroom management. Teachers
must begin to think of inclusion as *our class*, rather than *my class* (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010).

Cooperative teaching was described in the late 1980s as:

…an educational approach in which general and special educators work in co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings. In cooperative teaching, both general and special educators are simultaneously present in the general classroom, maintaining joint responsibilities for specified education instruction that is to occur within that setting. (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989, p. 18)

The distinctive feature of cooperative teaching is direct collaboration with general education and special education teachers working together in the same classroom most of the day with general education and SWD being taught the same curriculum (Ripley, 2015). An effective team of teachers works together as equal partners in interactive relationships, with both involved in all aspects of planning, teaching, behavior, and assessment. Areas for this collaboration include curricula and instruction, assessment and evaluation, and classroom management and behavior (Ripley, 2015).

Collaboration involves commitment by general education and special education teachers who work together, by school administrators, by the school system, and by the community (Ripley, 1997). Collaboration also involves time, support, resources, monitoring, and, more importantly, persistence. However, the biggest challenge is making time for planning, time for developing, and time for evaluating (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Sosu et al., 2010; Yang & Rusli, 2012). Planning can take place at the district and
the building levels, and especially at the classroom level. District planning helps to ensure that all resources are available, including time, funds, and professional assistance (Ripley, 1997).

Building-level planning assists the teams to ensure adequate support is in place to sustain new initiatives. Through instructional personnel, principals play an extremely important leadership role in facilitating collaborative efforts (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Sosu et al., 2010; Yang & Rusli, 2012). Both district- and building-level planning must include staff development opportunities to encourage teachers and administrators to participate in classes, workshops, seminars, and professional conferences on cooperative teaching. Motivation is an important ingredient for success, but additional skills are needed to accomplish the goals teachers set individually and for students (Ripley, 1997).

**Co-teaching Approaches**

There are six approaches to co-teaching that provide ways for two teachers to work together in a classroom (Friend & Cook, 1996; Friend & Cook, 2017). Those co-teaching models are: (a) alternative teaching, (b) one teach, one assist, (c) one teach, one observe, (d) parallel teaching, (e) station teaching, and (f) team teaching (Friend & Bursuck, 2009).

**Alternative teaching.** Alternative teaching is the co-teaching model that occurs when both teachers are in the same classroom but one teacher is working with a large group of students who are close to mastery of the skills being taught. The other teacher is working with a small group of students who need more individualized instruction in a specific skill (Friend et al., 2010). Both groups may consist of general education and SWD. The purpose of the small group is to help any student who needs individualized assistance and could not get enough help within the large group which is moving on the next skill. The small group can serve several purposes: (a) to provide individual attention to SWD and sometimes general education students, (b) to
provide assistance in enrichment, (c) to remediate deficiencies in any content area, (d) to provide individual or small group make-up testing, and (e) to increase vocabulary development through pre-teaching and re-teaching (Friend et al., 2010). During planning, both teachers decide which students have mastered skills and which students need further assistance on a skill. The instructional plan from both teachers could be completely different and do not have to be the same lesson (Perl, Maughmer, & McQueen, 1999).

An advantage of the alternative teaching model is that working with a student or a group of students meets the personal needs of all students no matter which group students are assigned to (Friend & Cook, 2017). The disadvantages of this modal is that if this approach is practiced too often, children quickly begin to label the large group as the ‘smart group’ and the small group as the ‘slow group’ and/or other labels. Additionally, students could view the teacher with the large group as the teacher in charge when in actuality, both teachers are responsible for all students. With the alternative teaching model, the noise level may get loud, so both teachers must keep noise down during instruction so that students are not distracted. In addition to controlling noise within the classroom, there must also be sufficient space for the groups of students to be able to move around, if necessary (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

**One teach, one assist.** The second co-teaching model involves one teacher who teaches the entire class, while the other teacher moves about assisting children to make certain that they are following the directions given. During collaboration and planning, teachers decide who teaches the entire class and who assists the students (Friend et al., 2010). In this co-teaching model, one teacher has the primary responsibility for planning and teaching, while the other teacher moves around the classroom helping individuals and observing particular behaviors. The
‘one assist’ teacher may also help to distribute materials and instructional supplies to students while the other teacher explains the directions. The provision of individual assistance when children need help is one of the major advantages of this approach. Behavior problems are often avoided because the ‘one assist’ teacher is moving among students to keep them from being frustrated and helping them stay on task. Additionally, the ‘one assist’ teacher has the opportunity to intervene with behaviors that may go unnoticed by the ‘one teach’ teacher during instruction (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

While those are some of the advantages of the ‘one teach, one assist’ co-teaching model, there are several disadvantages that might cause misunderstandings among students. When this model is used students often think that one teacher is in control and the other teacher is viewed as an assistant. As a result, students may not give the ‘one assist’ teacher respect (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). Other students may not be accustomed to having a teacher circulate among students and the movement may be distracting for them. In another instance, if this approach is used too often, students may expect immediate assistance when another approach is being used (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

**One teach, one observe.** The ‘one teach, one observe’ co-teaching model is an approach where one teacher leads the large group instruction and the other teacher simply observes. The ‘one observe’ teacher does not circulate among students providing assistance. One disadvantage of this model is that students may view the ‘one observe’ teacher’s behavior as inappropriate because they expect and are accustomed to one of the teachers helping them. With this approach, the ‘one observe’ teacher observes academic, behavior, and social interactions of students and collects data for later analysis during collaboration (Friend et al., 2010). To make
the model more effective both teachers should exchange the roles and no one teacher should teach or assist all of the time (Friend, 2016).

**Parallel teaching.** In the parallel co-teaching model, both teachers have an equal number of students in two groups. Each teacher teaches the same curriculum to foster instructional differentiation and to increase student engagement and participation (Friend et al., 2010). Both teachers must control their voices and the noise level and end their lessons about the same time for this model to work effectively (Friend & Cook, 2017; Perl et al., 1999).

In an inclusion class using the parallel co-teaching model, an effective team of teachers work together as equal partners who are involved in all aspects of planning, teaching, behavior, and assessment (Friend & Cook, 2017). Additionally, they must understand the importance of strategically dividing the class so that neither group has an overabundance of one type of student. To be effective, teachers must also be trained in the skills and strategies to support behavior management in the classroom and display the ability to differentiate instruction for SWD (Friend & Cook, 2017).

There are several advantages of parallel co-teaching. Parallel teaching allows teachers to work with smaller groups in the same classroom by reducing the student teacher ratio (Friend & Cook, 2017). Another advantage is students are able to receive instruction from different teachers and benefit from their varied instructional strengths. While there are advantages to parallel teaching, there are also disadvantages. A disadvantage is that both teachers must feel comfortable and be competent in teaching the subject content. It is important that both teachers end their lessons about the same time so one group is not waiting for the other group to finish. Behavior problems ensue if timing is off schedule (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999). As in other co-teaching models, classrooms must contain enough space to accommodate
both groups within the classroom and both teachers must be able to control the noise level of their group. This approach could be distracting to students who are easily distracted by another teacher providing instruction within the same classroom (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

**Station teaching.** Station teaching requires that students are divided into at least three groups as students rotate from station to station. Students are taught by the general education and special education teachers who have divided the instructional content, and teach a portion of it at two of the stations. One or more stations are working independently being led by a student leader or an adult volunteer (Friend et al., 2010). The independent stations are designed as learning centers that contain sufficient materials and supplies for student use with little adult support (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

Several advantages were noted of station teaching. First, both teachers in the classroom have defined roles and responsibilities that are clear to the students. Second, students receive more differentiated instruction within the small groups. Next, student behavior is more controlled within small groups because students are more engaged and can participate more frequently (Friend & Cook, 2017; Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

One of the disadvantages of station teaching is the amount of preplanning required to make it effective. Additionally, the noise level must be controlled within the groups because there are more of them. It is especially important to teach students how to work appropriately within their independent stations to maximize learning opportunities (Friend & Cook, 2017). Pacing is of utmost importance, especially because students are exchanging groups within the class period. Teachers must be cognizant of this time element and be able to complete the lesson within the preplanned instructional timeframe (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).
**Team teaching.** Team teaching involves two teachers, for example, the general education teacher and the special education teacher, working equally in planning and providing instruction to all students at the same time (Friend et al., 2010). Both teachers take turns leading large group instruction by lecturing, representing opposing views in a debate, and illustrating two ways to solve a problem (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999). Both teachers engage students actively in critical thinking activities or about a problem of interest to solve. Discipline and instruction are handled equally by both teachers (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

One of the major advantages of team teaching is the equality of teachers in their roles and responsibilities. Both teachers are in charge of classroom organization, management, and discipline (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). One of the disadvantages of this model is time consuming parent teacher conferences because of the need for both teachers to attend the conference. Planning for both teachers to attend can make scheduling the conferences difficult (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). Another disadvantage of this approach is that preplanning takes a considerable amount of time (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Perl et al., 1999).

**Perceptions of Inclusion**

Although the current study focuses on students with disabilities’ perceptions of inclusion and resource environments, other stakeholders’ perspectives are important to mention regarding their views of inclusion because they are advocates of SWD. Among those viewpoints, research is included to discuss the perceptions of general education teachers and special education teachers. Next, paraeducators are presented, and finally, students with disabilities’ perceptions of inclusive settings.

One important component of IDEA (2004) is the requirement for SWD to receive instruction in the least restrictive environment. The closer the instructional environment is to the
general education setting, the less restrictive that environment is considered (Harding, 2009). School officials have increased opportunities for SWD to stay in the general education setting for instruction throughout the nation. The federal government has established mandated levels of participation for SWD that schools must meet to continue receiving funding. General education teachers, administrators, and parents are required to make modifications in the curriculum, according to a student’s IEP, to include SWD (Harding, 2009; Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012).

**General education and special education teachers’ perceptions.** Gavish and Shimoni (2013) sought to determine which models are suitable for the inclusion of SWD in school and classroom settings, based on the views of general education teachers. Israeli general education teachers were asked to create a constraints free, best-case-scenario model, for the implementation of inclusion. Participants had difficulties visualizing a constraints-free scenario, as most of them preferred to suggest some particular ideas for improving the actual situation. Teachers’ responses enabled researchers to build a single composite model that includes seven dimensions: (a) the awareness dimension, (b) the moral dimension, (c) the knowledge dimension, (d) the organizational dimension, (e) the ecological-logistical dimension, (f) the social dimension, and (g) the pedagogic-didactic dimension. Those seven dimensions surround a fundamental model that was concerned with cultivating a new school climate and language in which inclusion was an integral component of the school’s overall character under the leadership of the school principal (Gavish & Shimoni, 2013).

General education teachers expressed resistance and fear towards the growing need to change the instructional practices in their classrooms (McCray & McHatton, 2011). Teachers reported that if they were making major changes to the structure and routines in their classes,
SWD were not ready to participate in the general education classroom (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012). Teachers often reported lack of appropriate support from special education personnel in their schools (Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011). While special education teachers reported that the general education teachers did not embrace SWD, they also reported that general education teachers did not want to work with SWD when a special education teacher or paraeducator was not in the classroom (Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011).

Faulkner, Crossland, and Stiff (2013) investigated whether the relationship of teachers’ perceptions of student mathematical performance, actual student math performance, and eventual eighth grade placement in Algebra I demonstrated patterns different for students with individualized education programs (IEPs) than for students without IEPs. Faulkner et al. focused on students with IEPs, in general, but also on students with IEPs who had performed well in mathematics through elementary school. Their research was designed to extend understanding of the placement of SWD in eighth-grade mathematics by focusing on longitudinal issues of teacher perception and students’ with disabilities math performance, particularly during the upper elementary and middle school years. As part of the study, Faulkner et al. examined whether high-performing students with IEPs were placed into courses in a manner that was consistent with a presumption that students with IEPs were less likely to excel in math (teacher perception) or consistent with student ability (math performance). Although Faulkner et al. did not deal with classroom environments, their study provided information about student experiences and contexts of learning, in particular the impact of teachers’ expectations on student potential within the learning environment.

Specifically, Faulkner et al. (2013) sought to determine whether students with IEPs were placed in Algebra at a rate consistent with demonstrated performance level or more in line with
teacher perceptions of their abilities. The results for all students’ math performance were three
times more powerful a predictor for eighth-grade placement in algebra than teacher perception.
Teachers’ perceptions were more powerful predictors of placement for higher performing
students than for low-performing students. For low-performing students, placement outcomes
were virtually the same, regardless of teacher perception. As cognitive performance increased,
the impact of teacher perception on student placement increased. Unlike for low-performing
students, where teacher ratings had virtually no impact on placement odds, the odds of higher
performing students with low teacher perception were affected. For students who were rated low
by their fifth-grade teacher, student placement in eighth-grade algebra was suppressed, even in
the presence of high math performance. Both teacher perception and math performance were
highly significant predictors of math placement for students with IEPs. As with all students,
there was also a significant interaction between teacher perception and math performance for
those students (Faulkner et al., 2013).

Since the requirements of LRE are mandated, the review of literature revealed inclusion
was the best way to include SWD into classrooms across the United States (Harpell & Andrews,
2010; Horn & Banerjee, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011). Research focused on best
practices and instructional techniques, as well as the impact of having SWD in general education
classrooms (Angelides, Savva, & Hajisoteriou, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). One of the most
highly explored areas is the perceptions of teachers regarding SWD included in general
education classrooms. Mowat (2009) found that teachers reported concerns regarding
perceptions of anxiousness and unpreparedness to provide these students with the support needed
to be successful in the general education classroom. Further, Mowat found that the perceptions
of inefficacy increased when students were included in the general education classroom who exhibited significant social and emotional behavioral problems.

Another reason general education teachers often experienced difficulty accepting SWD in their classrooms was because many students required excessive individualized support. In many instances, teachers reported they did not have the time nor training for such individualization (Cannon, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Gavish and Shimoni (2011) found general education teachers viewed practices of inclusion as chaotic and felt they placed them in positions of vulnerability to additional pressure created by serving SWD. The study results showed a relationship between teachers’ attitudes regarding inclusion of SWD in the general education classroom and the type and severity of their disabilities (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Ruijs, Peetsma, and van der Veen (2010) found that some teachers demonstrated more positive attitudes towards SWD with cognitive disabilities than students with behavioral disabilities. Teachers found the students with behavioral disabilities to be more disruptive in class and they felt less prepared to address the behaviors demonstrated.

Wilde and Avarmidis (2011) found that general education teachers’ perceptions towards working with SWD in an inclusive setting was significantly impacted by their understanding of the concept of inclusion, and the processes for its implementation in their schools. Ben-Yehuda, Leyser, and Last (2010) discovered some teachers viewed inclusion favorably, while others did not. The three main determining factors influencing teacher perceptions that Harpell and Andrews (2010) emphasized in their writing were: (a) experience, (b) training, and (c) strategic implementation through strong administrative leadership. A major issue reported by special education teachers was that general education teachers did not welcome them and often ignored their presence in the general education classroom (Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010). Special
education teachers noted that sometimes they were treated more like teacher assistants and were not given an opportunity to interact with nondisabled students (Brandes & Crowson, 2009; Nichols et al., 2010; Wong-Ratcliff, & Ho, 2011).

In contrast, general education teachers stated they were uncomfortable having another adult in the classroom (Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011). While in other cases, general education teachers interacted with SWD as little as possible and tried to transfer all responsibility to the special education teachers working with them (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Some special education teachers reported being uncomfortable working in the general education class because of inadequate content knowledge, large class sizes, and inability to give students adequate and needed individualized support (Brandes & Crowson, 2009; Nichols et al., 2010; Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011).

Despite negative perceptions from some educators regarding inclusion, research showed that general education students may benefit from the instructional changes made to accommodate SWD in the general education classroom (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Giangreco et al.’s research provided evidence in support of teachers incorporating teaching strategies for SWD in the general education environment. In support of Giangreco et al.’s research, Brandes and Crowson (2009) asserted some teachers were resistant to inclusion because they were personally uncomfortable around SWD and unfamiliar with teaching strategies that benefited them. The presence of those negative perceptions in the classroom impacted teachers’ ability to relate to SWD (Brandes & Crowson, 2009; Nichols et al., 2010; Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011).

The changed role of special education teachers increases opportunities for general education teachers to collaborate with, participate in program design, and assess the instruction provided within inclusion classrooms (Fenty et al., 2012). Angelides et al. (2012) found that the
implementation of inclusion in schools provided an opportunity for special education teachers to serve as leaders in the school. They were found vital in the appropriate creation and implementation of an inclusion program in a school for several reasons. Special education teachers have expertise with making accommodations, modifications, and determinations regarding the impact of disabilities on student achievement and behavior, which allow them to step into leadership roles resulting in best practices for inclusion (Angelides et al., 2012).

These types of interactions had a positive impact on general education teachers’ perceptions towards working with SWD and collaborating with special education teachers (Angelides et al., 2012). Teachers working together in a collaborative co-teaching approach are able to share personal expertise. In addition, collaboration creates paradigm shifts that support high learning expectations for all students (Parrish & Stodden, 2009).

Paraeducators’ roles and perceptions. Para is a prefix derived from ancient Greek meaning similar to (National Education Association, 2015). The term paraprofessionals is used interchangeably with paraeducators; however, for the purpose of this study, the term paraeducators is used. Paraeducators is a term that has been used for many years to designate those who work with and assist licensed professionals in the field of education. Paraeducators are respected members of the professional team (NEA, 2015). More recently, the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals coined the term paraeducator (NEA, 2015). The National Education Association’s Education Support Professional Quality department (ESPQ) adopted the term to refer to a “school employee who works alongside and under the supervision of a licensed or certificated educator to support and assist in providing instructional and other services to children, youth, and their families” (NEA, 2015, p. 5).
The licensed paraeducator remains responsible for: (a) overall conduct and management of the classroom, (b) design, implementation, and evaluation of the instructional program, and (c) student progress (NEA, 2015, p. 6). The majority of paraeducators work directly with students in their formative years at the preschool, kindergarten, and elementary levels. An even larger number of paraeducators work with special education students. Most have job responsibilities that relate to academic achievement and school safety (NEA, 2015).

Over the years, paraeducators have been a vital part of school personnel, especially in special education classrooms (Wasburn-Moses, Chun, & Kaldenberg, 2013). Initially, paraeducators were expected to perform administrative activities. However, the roles of paraeducators have drastically changed (Wasburn-Moses et al., 2013). The NCLB (2002) outlined appropriate responsibilities of paraeducators to include providing one-on-one tutoring, monitoring and providing support in computer labs or school libraries, working with parents, and assisting with classroom management (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Wasburn-Moses et al., 2013). Additionally, the requirements of the IDEA (2004) stipulated that paraeducators may only provide instructional activities under the direct supervision of a licensed teacher (Aplin & Jones, 2005; Ciangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Wasburn-Moses et al., 2013).

Giangreco et al. (2010) conducted a review literature and concluded that although paraeducators are primarily responsible for providing academic support to SWD, they often lack training and are poorly supervised. Lack of training for paraeducators is well documented (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Merchant, 2009; Frith & Lindsey, 1982), and their increased responsibility for instruction exacerbates the problem regarding their specific roles. Commonly reported training needs for paraeducators include behavior management, conflict management,
collaboration, knowledge of the various disabilities and teaching strategies (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

As involvement in instructional roles increased, the lack of agreement regarding appropriate roles for paraeducators made assignments and supervision challenging (Giangreco et al., 2010). Although licensed teachers were expected to supervise paraeducators, typically they were not trained in supervision. Therefore, teachers may not have planned well for paraeducators under their supervision (French, 2001).

One of the most common places paraeducators support SWD is in reading instruction (Giangreco et al., 2010). With increased attention to reading under the NCLB (2002) Act, paraeducators were critical to special education service delivery in inclusive classrooms where they were used to support teachers in reading instruction (Wasburn et al., 2013). Additional research focused on the use of paraeducators in the reading classroom (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lane, Fletcher, Carter, Dejud, & Delorenzo, 2007; Liston, Nevin, & Malian, 2009; Mercer, Cannon, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000). Lane et al. utilized paraeducators to implement a phonological awareness intervention because “given that teachers and other certified staff (e.g., counselors, reading specialists) are often challenged by the task of providing more focused interventions to students in need of additional support” (Lane et al., 2007, p. 268). Lane et al. concluded that paraeducators were used to provide effective individualized instructional support for at-risk early readers. In support of Lane et al.’s research, Mercer et al. (2000) also utilized paraeducators to implement a reading fluency program for middle school students. Mercer et al. found that paraeducators successfully provided instructional support in reading for SWD.

Wasburn et al.’s (2013) qualitative case study examined the use of paraeducators in reading instruction in an adolescent reading program. Wasburn et al. focused on
paraeducators’ roles and the training and the feedback they received. In their study, triangulation of data was achieved through the use of interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Supervising teachers and the school principal were supportive of the work of paraeducators. Washburn et al. found a need for clarification of paraeducator roles, individualized training and feedback, and shared planning. Attention to these issues is critical in an era of shifting service delivery models (Washburn et al., 2013).

The change in paraeducator roles was greatly impacted by the evolution of inclusion practices in schools (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Paraeducators performed additional instructional tasks in small groups and provided support to individual students when needed (Tews & Lupart, 2008). Liston, Nevin, and Malian (2009) found paraeducators reported some educators experienced difficulty working with another adult in the classroom. Liston et al. declared paraeducators were an asset to students in inclusive classes supporting the practice of using varied instructional practices to ensure the individual needs of students were met.

**Parents’ perceptions.** Parents had different views regarding the instruction of SWD in the general education classrooms (Algirdas, Kaffemaniene, Meliene, & Milteniene, 2011). Generally, parents had concerns regarding the progress of students with and without disabilities (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010). Some parents of general education students were reluctant to knowingly place their children in classes that are inclusive of SWD. Those parents were concerned that general education children may not get enough attention from the teacher (De Boer et al., 2010). Parents also stated that they did not want the learning environment disrupted by students with behavior problems (Harding, 2009). Parents’ concerns and their work to advocate for quality inclusive practices for their children comprise another large element in research about the evolution of inclusion (Algirdas et al., 2011).
Conversely, Carter, Sweeden, Cooney, Walker, and Moss (2012) found some parents of general education students welcomed the idea of having their children receive instruction in inclusive classes. At other times, parents were uncertain as to how to conceptualize its implementation. Ultimately, many parents wanted their children to benefit from the experience of learning with and from nondisabled peers (Carter et al., 2012). Research shows students in inclusive settings benefited from the opportunity to learn tolerance and acceptance of peers with disabilities (Harding, 2009).

Parents of SWD often expressed indecision regarding the most appropriate placement for their children (Ruswick-Cole, 2008). Parents typically want their children to have the opportunity to reach their optimal learning potential; but in some cases are unsure if that could be done in an inclusive environment (Algirdas et al., 2011). However, the only way some children are successful was if they are given the opportunity to participate in the general education setting. Still, other parents struggle with awareness that some teachers and students did not want their child with a disability in the general education classroom (Ruswick-Cole, 2008).

Parents want to know where the child’s needs are best met and that the highest quality of education is provided. Secondly, parents report that they felt the teacher provides the best pedagogical assistance. From the parents’ point of view, educational assistance provides at an appropriate institutional level is the most insufficiently developed element in inclusive classes (Ališauskas et al., 2011). There is a lack of intensive support from psychologists and teachers, and a need for better provision of compensatory services. In mainstream schools, children’s parents emphasize the need for assistance from specialists (e.g., speech therapists, social pedagogues, and psychologists), communication with the school, and the need for counseling in issues connected with their child’s education (Ališauskas et al., 2011).
DeBoer et al. (2010) studied parents’ attitudes towards inclusive education. Special attention was paid to parents’ attitudes and to the effect of these on the social participation of children with disabilities in regular schools. DeBoer et al. found 10 studies showing the majority of parents had positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Yet, parents of children with disabilities reported various concerns, including the availability of services in regular schools and individualized instruction. Several variables were found which related to parents’ attitudes, such as social-economic status, education level, experience with inclusion and type of disability. No studies examined the effects of parental attitudes on the social participation of children with disabilities. The importance of positive parental attitudes was elaborated in the discussion (deBoer et al., 2010).

In Algirdas et al.’s (2011) study, parents reported that an insufficient number of personnel was assigned in schools to meet the educational needs of their children. When children were included in general education classes, there was not enough communication and access to specialists, like psychologists and speech pathologists. Another source of concern for parents was the pressure of standardized testing (Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010). General education classes followed specifically defined timelines related to instruction that did not provide appropriate opportunities for remediation for students with skill deficits (Nichols et al., 2010; Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007). Successful inclusive environments must have a foundation in effective collaborative relationships between school professionals and parents (Carter et al., 2012; Yssel et al., 2007).

**Students’ perceptions.** Students, in general, may be impacted by the inclusion of SWD in the general education classroom (Ruijs et al., 2010). Teachers and students eventually adjust to different instructional strategies and methodologies designed to make the instructional
environment more accommodating to SWD (Ruijs et al., 2010). In inclusive classrooms where SWD were infused into the environment with general education students, those students did not always accept SWD (De Boer et al., 2010). Research indicated that negative attitudes were, in most cases, attributed to the negative perceptions and comments of teachers (De Boer et al., 2010).

Some general education students’ reported being afraid of the behaviors exhibited by SWD because they did not understand what those behaviors meant (De Boer et al., 2010). Additionally, general education students often did not understand the display of some behaviors by SWD with conditions such as Tourette’s syndrome where loud bursts of vocalizations may occur unexpectedly, or Autism where flapping of hands or arms may occur and make strange noises.

General education students reported teachers spent more time with SWD and showed favoritism towards them (De Boer et al., 2010). In contrast to De Boer et al.’s study SWD were welcomed by general education teachers and students because they were taught early in school how to interact with SWD. Those lessons were intentionally taught. Ryan (2010) reported that when the lessons first began, both teachers and students were uncomfortable and then later, the sense of uncomfortableness turned into tolerance and acceptance that lasted into adulthood.

Teacher Efficacy

When school staff shares the belief that they are able to achieve collective goals and overcome challenges to impact student achievement, students experience success in school (Donohoo, 2016). Based on a meta-analysis by Eells (2011), Hattie (2012) classified collective teacher efficacy as the main factor influencing student achievement. Collective teacher efficacy refers to the “collective self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational
difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities” (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004, p. 190). However in the current study, teacher self-efficacy is defined as a self-system that controls most personal activity, including appropriate use of professional knowledge and skills (Slovak, 2010). Teacher self-efficacy is the belief that teachers have about their abilities and skills as educators. Teacher self-efficacy has been shown to be an important teacher characteristic and one strongly related to success in teaching (Slovak, 2010).

Teachers’ perceptions of efficacy for working with SWD (e.g., in-service and preservice) when placed in the position of teaching inclusion classes were often mixed regarding their experiences (Allday et al., 2013; Rix et al., 2011; Sosu et al., 2010; Spence, 2010). Several teachers reported being inadequately prepared to address the needs of SWD, especially in the areas of academics and behavior (Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). Additionally, Wilde and Avramidis (2011) found lack of planning for appropriate implementation of inclusive instructional practices also created negative experiences for both general and special education teachers working collaboratively in an inclusion classroom. Teachers reported feeling unsupported and attempted to figure out what worked best with SWD through trial and error. Teachers’ perceptions of inadequacy were heightened in correlation to lack of support from administrators and special education professionals within their classrooms (Spence, 2010).

When SWD are taught by sensitive teachers who care and help them, their self-esteem may be enhanced (Eckhart et al., 2011). Haeberlin et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study and a follow-up study of students from inclusion classes. The study followed the students from pre-school through adulthood. The results showed those SWD who were taught by caring and
sensitive teachers achieved higher student success levels SWD from self-contained special classes (Haeberlin et al., 2012).

Teachers who had strong perceptions of self-efficacy regarding their personal instructional skill level tended to have a more positive attitude towards inclusion of SWD in their classes than those teachers who were less confident in their skill level (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009). Teachers in Spence’s (2010) study were confident in their ability to modify and adapt the instructional environment in a way that could benefit all students. In contrast, teachers with lower levels of self-efficacy regarding their instructional abilities were more intimidated by the additional responsibility of modifying instruction for SWD (Allday et al., 2013; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009).

In another study, teachers’ perceptions of efficacy in inclusive instructional settings was found to correlate with years of experience and exposure to in-service training (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Teachers with multiple years of experience had more confidence in their teaching ability and positive perceptions towards the ability to adapt instruction in a manner that was beneficial to SWD (Ben-Yehuda, Leyser, & Last, 2010).

**Preservice Teachers’ Training**

Despite federal mandates to educate SWD in the least restrictive environment, teachers continue to have mixed perceptions about their own preparedness to educate SWD in the general education setting (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). However, research has documented that teachers with more positive attitudes toward inclusion are more likely to adjust instruction and curriculum to meet individual needs of students and assume a more positive approach to inclusion than teachers with less positive attitudes toward inclusion (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Sosu et al., 2010; Wilde & Avarmidis, 2011). With inclusion becoming the norm in schools, teacher education programs are faced with the challenge of making significant
changes to educational programs in preparing preservice teachers to be prepared to meet the needs of all students (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012).

Preservice teachers who had little to no experience teaching SWD during student teaching experiences shared perceptions of inadequacy. Richards (2010) and McCray and McHatton (2011) found preservice teacher preparation programs did not provide enough emphasis on training new teachers how to work with diverse populations. While Ben-Yehuda et al. (2010) proposed that the benefits of preservice training on effective inclusion strategies had a strong impact on new teachers’ ability to accept the challenge of transferring learning into practice.

Those programmatic changes reflect the continuous merging transformations in traditional general education and special education programs (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). However, there was limited information about how new teacher educator programs influenced preservice teachers’ confidence or attitudes toward inclusive education as future teachers (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). To investigate this influence of teacher preparation programs on preservice teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion, a survey method was used to collect data from preservice teachers in one teacher-preparation program. The analyzed responses from preservice teachers indicated that preservice teachers from that particular teacher preparation demonstrated positive attitudes and confidence toward inclusion. Unique features of this teacher preparation program were that general education curricula was infused with special education curricula in special education survey courses (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012).

**Teacher Preparation Programs for Inclusion**

Teacher preparation programs ultimately adapt components that legislation creates to meet the mandates. Under the former NCLB law (2002), mandates were issued that special education teachers must be highly qualified before becoming the teacher of record in a classroom. *Highly*
qualified is a term defined by NCLB regarding teacher training in specific content areas. The teacher of record must have certification in the content area that they teach. The idea of teaching only general education students is no longer a viable option (McCray & McHatton, 2011).

To meet this need, college and university officials in teacher preparation programs have modified preparation programs so new teachers are prepared and certified upon graduation. Many teacher education programs prepare new teachers to be familiar with teaching diverse populations. However, the current modifications to course work are insufficient to satisfactorily prepare preservice teachers because coursework on teaching strategies for SWD is inadequate (McCrary & McHatton, 2011).

In some instances, general education program candidates are only required to take one or two courses focusing on special education (Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2005). Furthermore, practicum and student teaching experiences are usually focused only on a teacher candidate’s area of concentration, so he or she may not encounter SWD in those settings (Richards, 2010). McCrary and McHatton (2011) recommended increased coursework designed to introduce preservice teachers to concepts about special education earlier in teacher education programs.

Many SWD are educated in the same classrooms as their nondisabled peers (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015; Lamport, Graves, & Ward, 2012). For SWD to be successful in inclusive classrooms, teachers must be adequately prepared. Also, learning in classrooms with the least disruptions possible is essential to positive academic outcomes for all students. Therefore, to impede negative behavior as much as possible, teachers must be prepared to manage it (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015; Lamport et al., 2012). Oliver and Reshly (2010) argued, “Because of the excesses exhibited by students with severe behavior problems, teacher skills in classroom
organization and behavior management is necessary to address those challenging behaviors, attenuate academic deficits, and support successful inclusion efforts” (p. 188).

Research revealed favorable findings in the ability to foster positive attitudes towards inclusive practices during preservice teacher preparation programs (Sosu et al., 2010). Student teachers who participated in a program designed with components that support inclusion from a human rights viewpoint were found to have a more accepting opinion of including SWD in the general education classroom. Furthermore, research showed student teachers who participate in additional coursework on methods for teaching SWD had positive attitudes toward inclusion (Sosu et al., 2010). Experience working in inclusive classrooms during student teacher assignments and practicums also increased the instances where preservice teachers reported having a greater appreciation for the benefits of including SWD in the general education classroom. Student teachers pointed out how an inclusive environment promotes the development of individual students. An inclusive environment also provided SWD with the opportunity to learn about diversity within the classroom setting (Hanline, 2010).

Teacher Training

The need to train teachers to manage students with disruptive behavior is imperative since these students are often provided instruction in the same classrooms as their nondisabled peers (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015). Education, training, and cultural diversity are considered when recruiting teachers to teach SWD, especially those with behavioral training (Lamport et al., 2012). Teachers are trained in the skills and strategies to support behavior management in the classroom and display the ability to differentiate instruction for SWD. Frequent classroom distractions inhibit the learning experience of students. The teacher is the manager of the
classroom and he or she must have rules in place to hinder negative behaviors as much as possible (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015).

Earlier studies of Wagoner et al.’s (2006) reported general educators were not trained to effectively manage the challenging behaviors of EBD students, thereby making them apprehensive about having SWD in their classrooms. Furthermore, Sawka et al.’s (2002) research showed high turnover rates for teachers of EBD students. Therefore, students with EBD were left at greater risk of poor academic outcomes by constantly having to adjust to being taught by another teacher. Sawka et al. found response cost was one intervention teachers found effect to decrease negative behavior and encourage positive behavior in EBD students. A project entitled, Strengthening Emotional Support Services Model (SESS) was implemented in a large urban school district. Sawka et al. reported, “Certainly, one of the best approaches to addressing the concerns of serving students with EBD is to create an effective special education teacher workforce” (p. 224). The SESS project increased staff knowledge of effective behavior management of EBD students.

Teacher training preservice and in-service is an area of emphasis to support appropriate inclusive practices. Research showed that targeted training on disabilities and best practices for inclusion may have a positive impact on teachers’ attitudes and efforts towards its implementation (Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004). Ben-Yehuda et al. (2010) agreed with the earlier research of Wilkins and Nietfield (2004) regarding the positive benefits of in-service training of special education teachers for inclusion of SWD who exhibited disruptive classroom behavior.

In contrast, Horne and Timmons (2009) declared teachers who were in the profession for many years often declared that they were not provided sufficient training through their school district to work with SWD. Many participants indicated that additional training made them more
comfortable teaching SWD (Horne & Timmons, 2009). Those teachers expressed a desire for
disability specific training, and training in instructional strategies for students with various
disabilities.

Experienced general education teachers in the Horne and Timmons’ (2009) study also
expressed a need for more time to plan individually and collaboratively with their special
education counterparts. The results of Kosko and Wilkins’ (2009) study supported the findings
of Horne and Timmons (2009); which indicated that frequent large amounts of specific training
on inclusive practices was necessary to change teacher perceptions and to promote best practices
(Angelides et al., 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Studies by Richards (2010) and McCray and
McHatton (2011) supported those earlier results indicating that training was insufficient for
special education teachers for the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms.

Inclusion Settings in Special Education Research

Some educators may be under the assumption that all SWD are educated with their
nondisabled peers in inclusive environments (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine,
2012). Determining the best environment for SWD to achieve positive outcome is under
continuing debate that sometimes diminishes the likelihood of achievement. Many SWD have
suffered a long and often difficult history of treatment. Some teachers and service providers, not
only downplayed their capabilities, but also argued that excluding them in the educational
process is justified, proper, and right (Obiakor et al., 2012).

Research has countered perceptions that SWD cannot function in general education
classrooms. Jones and Hensley (2012) explored the impact of classroom placement on 51
middle school and high school students receiving special education services under intellectual
disabilities category, along with 12 special education teachers. The purpose was to analyze
students’ self-determination, perception of social support from teachers and classmates, and student-teacher relationships. Student and teacher reports were utilized in making comparisons between students in resource classrooms and inclusion classrooms. Results showed less dependency and greater perceptions of self-determination for students in inclusive classrooms.

**Co-teaching and Inclusion**

Collaboration within inclusive settings is described as *co-teaching* (Friend et al., 2010). Teachers diversify goals, assessment, and instruction to accommodate and meet the range of developmental and educational needs of all students (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2006; Friend et al., 2010; Gadberry, 2009). When SWD are placed in general education classrooms, it is assumed that teachers are prepared to accommodate them based on individual needs (Berry, 2006; Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010). The inclusion of SWD is most effective when teachers are collaborative and consultative (Nichols et al., 2010). This collaboration facilitates the successful inclusion of SWD (Carter et al., 2009).

During collaboration, general education and special education teachers typically discuss students’ needs. Collaboration in education is a legal mandate, a best practice for regular and special education teachers, and a necessary activity for the inclusion of children with disabilities (Hernandez, 2013). When collaboration occurs, teachers solve problems together, demonstrate instructional techniques, and participate in professional development, share resources, and network with other professionals (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009).

The most popular inclusion method is the co-teaching model (Friend et al., 2010). Co-teaching is defined as the partnership of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of
students (Friend et al., 2010). Within the general education classroom setting, SWD are taught in a flexible and deliberate manner to meet their learning needs (Friend et al., 2010).

Odom, Buysse, and Soukadou (2011) conducted a study about the effects of program quality for 142 children with disabilities, ranging in age from 48-54 months. The results showed a relationship between program quality and child outcomes for children with disabilities served in inclusive programs (Odom et al., 2011). Provisions within IDEA ensured that SWD from ages three through 21 are provided services in the least restrictive environment. States receive federal incentives to develop an early intervention system for infants and toddlers below age three with disabilities and their families (Odom et al., 2011). Children with disabilities were served in inclusive community-based programs, public preschools, or Head Start programs in North Carolina and Indiana (Odom et al., 2011). One of the main findings in those programs was that individualization, as a measure of quality inclusion, had a positive effect on children’s development in the areas of cognition, communication, and motor skills.

Cushman and Rodgers (2008) reported that perceptions of the learning environment by middle grades students more closely depicted researchers’ observations of classroom settings than teachers’ perceptions of the same settings. This finding supported the value of middle school students’ feedback on the learning environment. In a study of middle school students in Canada, Lapointe, Legault, and Batiste (2005) found that students’ attitudes toward learning and performance in mathematics classrooms were influenced by their perceptions of teachers. General education and gifted education students in Lapointe et al.’s investigation experienced greater achievement and motivation in classes where educators were viewed as helpful, caring, thoughtful, and friendly. In contrast, when teachers were perceived as oppositional, middle grades students reported a lower sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic value (Cushman & Rodgers,
2008). Within Lapointe et al.’s study, middle grades SWD were not affected either positively or negatively based on teacher opposition or support.

**The Impact of Inclusion on Student Achievement**

Research results showed the instructional accommodations that teachers implemented in general education classrooms to support SWD were also helpful for their nondisabled peers (Carter, 2007; Spence, 2010). Carter (2007) discovered SWD demonstrated improved performances after participating in general education classes. The additional exposure to grade level content instruction and interaction with their nondisabled peers was theorized as contributing to the improvements demonstrated by SWD (Carter, 2007).

Spence (2010) investigated the performances of general education students who participated in inclusion classes compared to students who participated in non-inclusive classes. Results showed achievement scores remained consistent between the groups and in some cases were higher in non-inclusive classes. However, Carter (2007) asserted that students who participated in inclusion classrooms demonstrated growth in achievement scores in some academic areas. However, the results were unclear regarding whether inclusion was the dominant variable that impacted the increase in academic achievement.

**Summary**

Chapter two presented a brief history of inclusion, inclusive classrooms, co-teaching methods, and responsibilities for general education and special education teachers. Legal considerations that contributed to the placement debate of inclusion topics were presented (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012; Maggin et al., 2011). Perceptions of inclusion consist of general education teachers and special education teachers, paraeducators, parents, and students with and without disabilities (Carter, Sweeden et
Teacher efficacy, teacher training, and teacher preparation for inclusion were discussed in this section (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Yang & Rusli, 2012). Finally, the impact of inclusion on student achievement was reviewed (Sosu et al., 2010).

Social changes of society and legislative requirements sparked a multitude of reforms in the areas of special education. Many of these changes have been positive for students; however there is still room for improvement. One major area that needs further development is determining best practices for providing services to SWD. Literature showed that students can demonstrate growth in academic achievement in both inclusive and resource environments.

In contrast, the literature revealed that many general education teachers are not adequately prepared to teach inclusive classes (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015; Cannon, Gilmore, & Cuskelley, 2003; Gavish & Shimoni, 2011; Lamport et al., 2012; Mowat, 2009; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Some special education teachers are more secure in a resource environment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Additionally, there is still much debate and speculation about which students benefit most from participation in inclusive settings and whether some are not learning in their LRE when they are placed in a general education classroom (Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Horn & Banerjee, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011).

Researchers are continually seeking to determine best practices for students in inclusive environments so all students benefit (Angelides, Savva, & Hajisoteriou, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Harpell & Andrews, 2010). To improve the implementation of this service model in a positive manner, new information is needed regarding how SWD describe their instructional experiences and how such attitudes and experiences impact their ability to progress.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand and describe the perceptions of 10 ninth grade SWD who received special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting. More specifically, the researcher sought to provide a rich and descriptive voice for ninth grade SWD who described the phenomenon of being placed in their least restrictive environment. Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ experiences by identifying their thoughts and lived experiences in an inclusive setting and resource setting.

Chapter three reviews the design of the study, the main research question formulated, sub-questions, and the setting. Participants are described with the criteria for participation in the study and the exclusion criteria of participants are presented. The researcher’s role is clearly described. The methods of data collection and data analysis are defined. Then ethical considerations are discussed, followed by a summary.

Design

The research design for this study was a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological because further exploration was needed to understand the perceptions of ninth grade SWD regarding their instructional environments and the factors that impacted their views (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Stake, 2006). A phenomenological methodological approach was taken to examine the lived experiences of ninth grade SWD from two high schools located in a rural school district in Southeastern Georgia. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, which included the use of open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed.
Data collection was achieved through the data sources of individual interviews with SWD currently in grade 9, two student focus groups, and observations in one or both settings. The data was analyzed using a constant comparative analysis to identify common patterns, codes, and themes from the students’ responses. A general interpretative approach to organize and reduce the data into thematic categories was utilized. Conventional manual content analysis was used to develop coding categories that were derived directly from the data known as a grounded theoretical approach (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Qualitative research, as described by Stake (1995), draws together “naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods” in a bicolor design, or in his words, “a palette of methods” (Stake, 1995, pp. xi-xii). According to Yin (2014), a phenomenological study design is considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions, (b) the behavior of those involved in the study cannot be manipulated, (c) cover contextual conditions because they are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

Phenomenology is an approach to study an idea or concept that holds a common meaning for a small group of approximately three to 15 individuals (Creswell, 2014). The approach centers on lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, such as grief, and guides researchers to divulge in-depth, rich lived experiences from individuals to an essential concept. Phenomenological research generally focuses on a single concept or idea in a narrow setting such as professional growth or a caring relationship (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011).

In contrast to the other approaches, phenomenology’s tradition is important for establishing themes in the data. In addition to its relationship to philosophy, another key phenomenology feature is bracketing, a “process by which the researcher identifies and sets
aside any personal experience with the phenomena under study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 78).

Bracketing is a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007).

For descriptive transcendental phenomenology to occur, researchers must engage in epoche’, where preconceived notions are set aside, attempting to examine data from a pure state through a process called bracketing (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Moustakes, 1994; Simon, 2011). The goal was to describe the experiences of ninth grade students’ with disabilities voices regarding their educational settings as opposed to interpreting any given data from the viewpoint of the researcher’s personal experiences. The researcher worked in a self-contained settings as a special education teacher of SWD; hence bracketing was an obligatory step for this study.

Creswell (2014) favors a systematic methodology outlined by Moustakas (1994) in which participants were asked two broad, general questions: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? (b) What context of situations have typically influenced your experiences of the phenomenon? For some researchers, phenomenology may be too structured. Creswell (2013) also mentions the additional challenge of identifying a sample of participants who share the same phenomenon experience.

**Research Questions**

**Central Research Question**

The central research question was, “How do ninth grade students with disabilities describe their lived experiences, either in an inclusion setting or a resource setting?” To better
understand how students with disabilities describe their lived experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting, three sub-questions were explored.

**Sub-Question 1**

SQ1: How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings?

**Sub-Question 2**

SQ2: How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive similarities and differences in an inclusive classroom setting and a resource setting?

**Sub-Question 3**

SQ3: What factors, if any, impact ninth grade students’ with disabilities experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting?

**Setting**

The setting for this study is two rural high schools (Barron High School and Cannon High School) located in a small, school district in Southeastern Georgia. The school district pseudonym is Ronald County School District, which is a public school system managed by the county Board of Education, serving approximately 35,000 students, attending 36 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, eight high schools, four magnet schools, and three other schools. Nearly 2,200 pre-kindergarten through grade 12 teachers are employed (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). For the purpose of this study, a small school district is one that has 35,000 students or less. This setting was selected because of its size and positive reputation in the community of the identified school district (Georgia Department of Education, 2014).
School District Data

The total general population includes 3,785 grades 9 through 12 SWD from four high schools. The sample population consisted of 110 ninth grade students identified as having specific learning disabilities (SLD) from four high schools in Ronald County School District. The other excluded disability areas represented in the schools are autism, deaf/blind, deaf/hard of hearing, emotional behavior disorder, mild intellectual disability, moderate intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, profound intellectual disability, severe intellectual disability, speech impairment, and visual impairment/blindness.

The pseudonyms for the high schools in the Ronald County School District are Barron High School, Cannon High School, Carruthers High School, James High School, and Williams High School. The two high schools within the district that were selected contain the largest number of SLD ninth grade SWD as the sample population for this study. Barron High School and Cannon High School were the sites selected because they contain the largest number of SLD ninth grade SWD. Both selected high schools have nearly equal numbers of males and females in the population of SLD ninth grade SWD.

Demographics for Barron High School. Barron High School was founded in 1960. The school has an International Baccalaureate Programs, top-rated magnet schools and programs, specialized curricula such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and arts infusion, and technology rich classrooms. Approximately 800 students in grades 9 through 12 attend Barron High School, with the majority of students (87.47%) at the poverty level and eligible for free and reduced priced meals. Since 1989, the enrollment reached over 1,800 students and those numbers have decreased over double during nearly three decades. In 2014, the majority (86%) of students were African American; nine percent are White; less
than one percent are Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and multiracial. The average daily attendance rate is 90.3%. The graduation rate is 64%. The post-secondary plans for the class of 2015 were 20% attended a four-year college; 12% attended a two-year college; and 67% joined a branch of the military or obtained employment. Table 1 shows that students’ SAT scores are below the state and the school district for 2015-2016.

Table 1

*SAT Scores for Barron and Cannon High Schools, 2015-2016*

ACT scores are shown for the State, Ronald County Schools, Barron High School, and Cannon High School. Barron High School shows lower scores than the State, Ronald County, and Cannon High School. Cannon High School has lower scores than the State, and higher scores in English and Math than Ronald County and Barron High School; and lower scores than Ronald County in Reading and Science, as depicted in Table 2.
College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is currently Georgia’s statewide accountability system (Georgia Department of Education, 2016). The CCRPI assesses how well students are prepared for college and careers and ensures that schools are focused on improving achievement among all students. The index measures progress on indicators such as content mastery, student attendance, and preparation for the next school level. Schools earn CCRPI points based on indicators that vary by grade and school level and align with measures of college- and career-readiness. Schools may earn up to a set number of points in three main categories, for a total of 100 possible points. Barron High School students experienced a decrease in CCRPI scores each year over a 4-year period. Cannon is higher than State, Ronald County, and Barron for 2015 year; and lower than State and Richmond County all other years, as shown in Table 3.
Demographics for Cannon High School. Cannon High School opened in 1999, for convenience and to relieve overcrowding at two nearby high schools. Cannon is one of the highest ranking schools in the district and state. The majority (62%) of the students are African American followed by 29% who are White. A small percentage (1 percent to 3 percent) of the students are multiracial, Hispanic, and Asian. Half of the students are males and 45% are females. Nine percent of the students are SWD and 58% are economically disadvantaged. The CCRPI is 64.1%. For the school, college readiness is 72% graduate compared to 73% for the state. Forty-five percent enter college compared to 54% in the state. Sixty percent of the students attend four-year colleges compared to 74% for the state. Another 63% attend any
higher learning institution compared to 74% for the state. For ACT college entrance testing, the school’s average was 18 compared to 20 for the state, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

2013-2014 Career, Technical, and Agriculture Education (CTAE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grades 6-8</th>
<th>Grades 9-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades 6-8</td>
<td>74.21%</td>
<td>58.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>68.19%</td>
<td>61.12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Georgia Milestones Assessment System is a comprehensive summative assessment program spanning grades 3 through high school. Georgia Milestones measures how well students have learned the knowledge and skills outlined in the state-adopted content standards in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Students in grades 3 through 8 took an end-of-grade assessment in each content area, while high school students took an end-of-course assessment for each of the eight courses designated by the State Board of Education (Georgia Department of Education, 2014), as depicted in Table 5.
Table 5

2014-2015 Georgia Milestones End-of-Course Assessment

The participants for this study were drawn from a convenience sample of high schools located in Ronald County School District during the fall semester of 2016-2017 school year (Castillo, 2009). The school district is a low income community based on the percentage of eligible students on free and reduced priced meals. The students were selected from two of four high schools in the school district with a large number of students with learning disabilities. Ninth grade SWD from two high schools were invited to participate in this study. The participants for the study receive special education services, according to their Individual Education Programs (IEPs), and participate in inclusion settings and resource settings.

Ninth grade SWD who met these criteria were offered the opportunity to participate in the study. Participants in this study also participated in the Aspire program that promotes student
self-advocacy and self-esteem. Students with disabilities who participate in the program learn to assist in facilitating their goals at IEP meetings.

Ninth grade SWD were selected as the targeted participants because they were more likely to have the ability to express their views regarding their experiences in inclusive and resource settings than younger students. Also, ninth grade SWD probably have experiences in both classroom settings. Additionally, ninth grade SWD have transitioned from middle school to high school and their descriptions of experiences in different classroom settings provide valuable information for planning appropriate programs to facilitate social adjustment in the high school environments. Participation was open to all ninth grade SWD from all ethnic groups, male and female with a primary disability identified as specific learning disabilities (SLD). A parent consent/child consent form was given to all parents and students who attended an informational meeting about the study that was held with parents and students, the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools, and the researcher. In Table 6, demographics are shown for ninth grade SLD students in four high schools.

### Table 6

Demographics for Ninth Grade SLD Students in Four High Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability/Gender</th>
<th>Barron High School</th>
<th>Cannon High School</th>
<th>James High School</th>
<th>Williams High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLD</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD/Girl</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD/Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All students were eligible for special education services in the area of specific learning disability category. Participants did not have significant language impairments due to the nature
of individual interviews and focus group discussions. Students with language impairments might have been embarrassed and frustrated, if stuttering occurred or delayed word recall occurred when speaking openly in front of other students; therefore they were not included in this study.

Additional exclusion from the study included SWD identified in the area of emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) or severely emotional disorder (SED). Those students were excluded from the study because of the possibility that behavior problems and distracting behaviors could have inhibited data collection (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). The EBD student often times cannot or may not know how to control their behavior in various settings (Oliver & Reschly, 2010). In addition, severe and profoundly disabled students were excluded from this study due to their limited cognitive, physical, and language functioning abilities (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Carter et al., 2012). All other eligibility areas were excluded, if the disability was considered primary, with the exception of students identified as SLD.

**Procedures**

After requesting and obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix J for IRB approval #2567.081116) from Liberty University, permission was granted from the superintendent’s designee, namely the Coordinator of Assessments and Research, to conduct the study in the school district (Appendix I). Next, permission was requested and received from two high school principals to conduct the study at their respective high schools (Appendix C). Parental permission and child consent forms were collected after inviting all SLD ninth grade students from the selected high schools to voluntarily participate in two student focus groups (Appendix D), and semi-structured individual interviews (Appendix E).

Two separate meetings were held: (a) one at each high school, with parents, students, and the Aspire Coach, and (b) with special education teachers at each high school. The meetings
were regularly scheduled parent meetings with the Aspire Coach. The researcher attended the meetings so that parents would not have to attend an additional meeting to hear about the study. All students who met the study criteria were invited to participate so as many students as possible had the opportunity to be included in the study. Then the researcher worked toward data saturation since the research design is a phenomenological study and the research method is a constant comparative analysis.

Families’ names and phone numbers were obtained from the main office with permission of the principal of each school. The letters were sent home by students to give to the parents of students. A staff designee placed the letters in the students’ homeroom teachers’ mailboxes. Those teachers passed the letters out to students before school dismissal. Homeroom teachers were notified ahead of time that those letters were important invitations for parents and students to attend a meeting after school.

Refreshments were served to parents and students. At the meeting, informed consent letters were passed out to each parent and discussed prior to signing. For parents who did not agree to sign that day, some took the letters home and several were returned. The purpose of the study and procedures were explained during the meeting. Then the researcher answered questions from parents and students. Parental consent and children’s assent forms were combined into one document and were provided to parents and students who wished to be considered as participants.

To serve as an incentive, each parent in attendance with their child received a red ticket containing six numbers. The ticket had a section on it for the parent to write their e-mail address and phone number. The other half of the ticket containing the same numbers was placed in a box. Parents were advised not to lose their ticket after the meeting. To those parents in
attendance, the researcher offered an opportunity for one of them to receive a $50 gift certificate, if their child participated in the study through its completion. At the end of the data collection phase of the study, the researcher pulled a ticket and contacted the winner via e-mail and with a follow up phone call. The parent whose ticket was pulled won the gift certificate.

After the consent forms with parent and student signatures were collected, parents were sent a confirmation letter by their child informing them that their child would participate in the interviews and focus groups for the study. There were no names of volunteers over the maximum who were placed on a waiting list in the event a child or the parent decided to withdraw from the study for any reason.

**Criteria for Participation**

The following criteria were used to identify which SLD students to invite to participate in this study: enrolled in the ninth grade, IEPs, participate in inclusion classroom and/or resource classroom for at least one year, both males and females, and any race/ethnicity. Another criteria for student participation was good verbal communication, as recommended by the general education and special education teachers. Student participants were able to verbally express themselves and were open to answering questions posed in individual interviews and participating in a group discussion (O’Neill, 2012).

There was no examination of students’ academic grades, academic information, IEPs, or samples of student work. Included in the letter, parent permission was requested to conduct a digital recording of each participant’s interview to ensure the accuracy of what was said. The signed parent and child assent form did not obligate a child to continue participation in the study even if his or her parent agreed. Student participants chose to participate in the study through the completion of the data collection phase.
All information collected is confidential. No identifying information has been reported in this study about the school district, the schools, or participants. All the information collected was used solely for the purpose of this study. This information was not disclosed in compliance of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1973 (FERPA). In addition, all national, state, and local regulations regarding confidentiality were followed. The researcher is not related to any participants in this study.

**Sampling Method**

For this study, convenience sampling was used because ninth grade SWD were specifically identified based on primary eligibility and the fact that they attended the same high schools. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Castillo, 2009). With subject selection based on predetermined criteria, participants contribute to the research study (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). According to MacMillan and Schumacher (1997), convenience sampling is useful:

> When one wants to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalize to all such cases. . . . [these] samples will be chosen because they will be likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating. (p. 397)

Participants were selected because they were easy to recruit and the researcher did not consider selecting participants who are representative of the entire population (Castillo, 2009). Many researchers prefer this sampling technique because it is fast, inexpensive, easy, and the participants are readily available. The most obvious criticism about convenience sampling is bias and the sample is not representative of the entire population. Another significant criticism
about using a convenience sample is the limitation in generalization and inference making about the entire population. Since the sample is not representative of the population, the results of the study were not generalized to the entire population in Georgia or the nation (Castillo, 2009).

**Sample Population**

The sample population contains a total of 10 ninth grade SWD, with the highest numbers in Barron High School, with 29 SWD; and 32 SWD in Cannon High School for a total of 61 SLD students. Of the four high schools, the two selected high schools that were included in this study containing the highest number of SLD ninth grade boys and girls were Barron High School and Cannon High School. The remaining two high schools do not contain a sufficient number of SLD ninth grade boys and girls, as depicted in Table 7.

**The Researcher’s Role**

In this qualitative transcendental, phenomenological study, I served as the human instrument (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) first introduced the concept of the human being as the research instrument to stress the uniqueness of the researchers’ role in the process of scientific inquiry. This uniqueness lies in the belief that only a person can construct and bring meaning into the study through personal qualities of sensitivity, responsiveness, and flexibility. By bringing meaning into the study, this makes that person the most appropriate instrument for inquiries to find understanding, meaning, and the promotion of critical awareness into the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary point of interest in qualitative inquiry is the understanding of a phenomenon of interest from the perspective of ninth grade SWD. Nevertheless, I consciously or unconsciously, bring to the research setting my predispositions, assumptions and beliefs, which may support or deviate from those of the study participants.
Table 7

Demographics of Grades 9-12 Students with Disabilities in Four High Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Area</th>
<th>Barron High School</th>
<th>Cannon High School</th>
<th>James High School</th>
<th>Williams High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism (AU)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/Blind</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/Hard of Hearing (D/HH)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild Intellectual Disability (MID)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Intellectual Disability (MOD)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment (OH)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Impairment (OIH)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profound Intellectual Disability (PID)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability (SLD)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Intellectual Disability (SID)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Impairment (SI)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Impairment/Blindness (VI/B)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a former special education teacher and a current special education administrator at a state agency, I am sensitive to the needs of SWD, and like others; I want them to be treated well in any educational environment. Although I am cognizant that not all SWD are placed in the least restrictive environment that is an inclusive setting, I acknowledge that most SWD could benefit from that environment and could be given a fair opportunity to participate. I am not related to any participant in this study.
My concerns and views regarding the fair treatment of all SWD may impact personal impressions while gathering data and observing classes. Additionally, while analyzing data, bias could create more critical observations and interpretations from the interviews. However, my familiarity with special education practices and law helps to address strengths and weaknesses of inclusive and resource classes from a heightened level of background knowledge that other qualitative researchers may not possess.

**Data Collection**

The forms of data collection and the sequence for data collection adhered to were: (a) individual interviews, (b) focus groups interviews, and (c) observations. Using these forms of data collection helped in triangulation of data to ensure credibility in this study (Creswell, 2014). These forms of data collection allowed participants to describe their perceptions of two settings: inclusion and resource based on the number of methods used. To ensure the accuracy of the interviews, participants’ responses were digitally recorded, with the permission of the participants and their parents. As with interviews, detailed digital recording was a necessary component of the focus groups since it forms the basis for analyzing the data. Data triangulation is the use of a variety of data sources, including time, space and persons in a study (Hales, Peersman, & Rugg, 2010). Findings can be corroborated and any weaknesses in the data can be compensated for by the strengths of other data, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the results.

**Data Collection Strategies**

A description of how data were collected and recorded was presented. The sequence of the data collection was: (a) interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) observations. The rationale for the sequence was first to complete individual interviews because it was assumed that they would...
take the longest and some of the students may be absent, so it was best to complete the longest and most difficult part of this study first. Second, since there were focus groups held at each high school, this data collection source was considered the next most difficult. Finally, the informal observations were completed. The observations took several days to complete and were randomly selected in close proximity of classes with other SWD based on their individual schedules.

**Individual interviews.** The first method of data collection used in this study was individual interviews with each student who served as participants. For privacy and few distractions, students were interviewed in the school’s Media Center’s conference room with the researcher and the Aspire Coach, using 16 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix E; Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer). The interviews were digitally recorded to ensure the accuracy of each participant’s responses, then later transcribed by a transcriptionist (Mark, Rog, Thomas, Frierson, Hood, & Hughes, 2010). A semi-structured interview is an interview with a “flexible and fluid structure of questions that are asked in a similar manner to each participant” (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004, p. 25). The structure of an interview is usually organized around an interview guide that contains topics, themes, or areas to be covered during the course of the interview. The interview questions were designed to establish a basic idea of how the student perceived the environment and learning opportunities within the classroom. The aim of interviews in this study was not only to ensure flexibility but also to guide the how and what sequence of the questions asked. Additionally, the researcher had the flexibility to ask follow up questions to provide clarity to a participant’s comments (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).
To provide validation and check for consistency of the individual interview questions and focus group questions, a peer-review pre-research study or pilot study was performed with three special education teachers who were not part of the actual study (Soukakou et al., 2014). The interview questions were emailed to them with complete directions under a blind copy so participant identities were not revealed. Pilot study participants were emailed an information letter along with the interview questions and focus group questions. They were given 5 days to review the questions and provide their responses as to whether the questions were appropriate when posed to ninth grade SWD (Soukakou et al., 2014). Minor revisions were made in the interview and focus group questions before the actual study began based on pilot study participants feedback. Since teachers only provided an opinion concerning the interview questions and focus group questions, personal information was not collected from them.

Using individual interviews was the first step of data collection. Six ninth grade SWD from Barron High School and four from Cannon High School volunteered to be individually interviewed. Most individual interviews were conducted during the last period of the school day. However, high school students take elective courses and for several students that allowed various times during the school day to interview them as well.

The principals, general education teachers, special education teachers serving the students, and the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools received an information letter that contained the purpose of the study and their role in the study. A master schedule of names, times, and location of each interview was developed and shared with the principal, ninth grade teachers, the Aspire Coach, and special education teachers. Follow up questions were asked during the interviews to provide clarity or to elicit more explanation from a
student’s responses, as needed. Both the facilitator and co-facilitator were present during the interview with each participant.

Pseudonyms were given to each student so their real names were not used in the published study and analysis of data. Student interviews averaged 20-30 minutes varying with each student. After each interview, the special education teacher referred to the schedule, got another student from his/her homeroom, and walked the student to the Media Center. The special education teacher escorted each student back to his/her classroom and when time permitted, got the next student whose name was on the list. This procedure was followed each day until all interviews were completed for each student.

During the interviews, handwritten notes were made (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011) on the Field Notes Form (see Appendix F). The use of handwritten notes along with verbally transcribed accounts helped to achieve the most comprehensive and accurate description of the interview. Following each interview, the recordings were immediately reviewed to ensure an audible recording and to verify whether a follow-up interview was needed. Extensive and detailed notes were written immediately after the interview in case the recording failed to replay at later date or there was a portion of the recording that was inaudible (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Sixteen student interview questions were posed of each student with the opportunity to ask additional questions and prompting for clarity, if needed (see Appendix E; Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer).

After all interviews were completed, a professional transcriptionist listened to the digital recordings and transcribed a verbatim account of what was said (Mark, Rog, Thomas, Frierson, Hood, & Hughes, 2010). Transcription of the raw data includes word-for-word quotations of participants’ responses and a description of participants’ characteristics, enthusiasm, body
language, and overall mood during the interview. Notes from the interviews were used to identify speakers or to recall comments that may be garbled or unclear on the tape. Minor utterances, for example, ‘umm’, ‘ah’, and ‘huh-huh’ were excluded in the transcriptions, except where they represented significant information.

**Interview questions.** The interview questions were divided into the following sections from the review of literature to answer the three sub-research questions (see Appendix E; Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer).

*Teachers.* Questions 1 and 2 were asked to determine if participants knew what the special education teacher did in the inclusion classroom. Questions 3 and 4 were asked to see if the students knew why there were two teachers in the inclusion classroom, and if they liked having two teachers in the room and why.

1. What does (fill in the name of the LD teacher) do in your classroom?
2. Who does (fill in the name of the LD teacher) work with in your classroom?
3. Why do you have two teachers in your class?
4. How do you like having two teachers?

*Classroom.* The classroom section of interview questions was designed to determine participants’ preferences for inclusion setting and/or resource setting. Questions 5, 6, and 7 were asked to determine whether participants recognized differences and similarities between inclusion and resource settings. Additionally, participants were asked which way they liked best and which way would help them to learn better.
5. (Last year or 2 years ago) you were in a class where some students left the room every day to get special help in another teacher’s room, like (fill in the special education teacher’s name).

6. Which way do you like best, when kids leave the classroom to get special help, or when they stay and get special help in your classroom? Probe: Why do you like that way best?

7. Which way do you think helps kids learn better (refer to #5 as necessary)? Probe: Why?

Instruction. The third section of interview questions was instruction. Question 8 asked students which way they prefer to have social interaction in making friends and why. SWD developed a better social network of friends in inclusion classes and interacted more socially with peers and their teachers (Eckhart et al., 2011). Questions 11 through 14 asked participants’ preferences for working alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class. While student perceptions of inclusive and general education environments were investigated, there are few studies that investigated students’ perceptions of their engagement in those environments and why they preferred working alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class, as they were asked in the current study (Anderman et al., 2011; McHatton et al., 2014; Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011; Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009).

8. Which way do you think helps kids have more friends (refer to #5 as necessary)? Probe: Why?

11. When you have reading or language arts you might work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class?

12. Which way helps you the most (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)? Which way helps you a lot, but not as much as (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)?
13. Which way sort of helps you, but not as much as (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)?

14. Which way helps you the least (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)? Why?

Classroom support. The next section was classroom support. Question 9 asked whether participants needed more help with school work than they were receiving and which way was best to get more help. Questions 15 and 16 referred to participants helping other students with their work when they knew something that others do not know and other students helping them when they know something they do not know.

9. Do you need more help with your school work than you will be getting? Probe: What do you think would be the best way for you to get more help?

15. Do you like to teach other students when you know something they do not know? Why (or why not)?

16. Do you like other students to teach you when they know something you do not know? Why (or why not)?

Teacher preferences. The last section was teacher preferences. Participants were asked in Question 10 who was their favorite person to teach them when they did not understand their work. Haeberlin et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study and a follow-up study of students from inclusion classes. The results showed that SWD who were taught by caring and sensitive teachers achieved higher student success levels than SWD from self-contained special classes (Haeberlin et al., 2012).

10. When you do not understand your work, who is your favorite person to teach you? Probe (if the student mentions someone at home). What about at school? Why?
Focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were held in the Media Center conference rooms in both high schools with participants who volunteered to participate in this study. It was anticipated that six students from each school would participate but six from Barron and four from Cannon volunteered to participate. The data was combined for both groups since there was no comparison of schools as the study’s focus (O’Neill, 2012). Although focus groups emerged as a popular technique for gathering qualitative data, both among sociologists and across a wide range of academic and applied research areas (Morgan, 1996), focus groups have their challenges (O’Neill, 2012). Focus groups are used as a research method and in combination with other research methods such as individual, in-depth interviews (O’Neill, 2012). No comparisons were made between focus groups and individual interviews in producing interaction among participants (Morgan, 1996). Krueger and Casey (2000) recommended that focus groups are composed of a relatively homogeneous group of people such as SWD in the current study.

Warm up questions were asked to get students to speak informally and get comfortable speaking in front of students in the group. Each student was given an opportunity to answer the warm up question after raising his/her hand to be acknowledged. At the end of the session, students were permitted to take a restroom break before the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools escorted them back to their classrooms. All students were given a pre-written excuse to give to the teacher when they returned to class.

The co-facilitator recorded nonverbal behaviors and interactions observed during the focus group discussions that helped the researcher to better understand comments made by participants. The co-facilitator also operated the digital recording device to ensure its proper operation. The two focus groups consisted of a total 10 ninth grade SWD who are served in
either an inclusive setting or resource setting. Eight focus group questions were posed of each focus group (see Appendix D).

**Focus group questions.** The focus group interview questions are inductive, naturalistic, and focused on ninth grade students with disabilities’ experiences and placement in inclusive settings and resource settings (see Appendix E; Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer). A Student Focus Group Protocol was used as a guide for the group discussion (see Appendix H). The focus group discussions lasted approximately 40-50 minutes per group. The first focus group consisted of six ninth grade SWD at one of the targeted high schools. At the second high school, the focus group consisted of four ninth grade students. The researcher served as the facilitator; and the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools served as co-facilitators during each session. The role of the researcher was to conduct a group interview with the student participants. The role of the special education teachers at the high schools was to escort students to and from the Media Center. The Aspire Coach served as a familiar person in the focus group so students were able to relate to someone at the school. In addition, participants were now familiar with the researcher since she individually interviewed each student before the focus group convened.

Specific times, dates, and meeting locations were arranged at both high schools where the focus group of SWD met uninterrupted during various times of the school day for approximately 40 to 50 minutes, with principals’ permission. When students arrived to the conference room, the purpose of the study was explained by the researcher. A digital recorder was placed in the middle of the table to record what was said. Students were asked to speak up in a clear voice. Students were instructed to state their name before speaking and to raise their hand to speak.
Real names were used during the focus group because most students already knew each other. However, during the final dissertation report, pseudonyms were substituted for their real names.

*Classroom support.* Question 1 asked participants about whether they received enough help in their classes. Frequently, inclusion classrooms inhibit the learning experience of students (Akalin & Sucuoglu, 2015).

1. Do you need more help with your school work than you will be getting? Probe: What do you think would be the best way for you to get more help?

*Teacher preferences.* Participants were asked in Question 2 who was their favorite person to teach them if they did not understand their work.

2. When you do not understand your work, who is your favorite person to teach you? Probe (if the student mentions someone at home): What about at school? Why?

*Classroom.* Questions 3 through 6 were asked to determine participants’ work preferences in class. The goal of this question was to determine student perceptions of instructional practices in their classes.

3. Which way helps you the most (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)?

4. Which way helps you a lot, but not as much as (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)?

5. Which way sort of helps you, but not as much as (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)?

6. Which way helps you the least (work alone, with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class)? Why?
Working with peers. Questions 7 and 8 asked whether participants preferred for other students to teach them about something they do not know and if they preferred to teach other students.

7. Do you like to teach other students when you know something they do not know? Why (or why not)?

8. Do you like other students to teach you when they know something you do not know? Why (or why not)?

Observations. After the interviews and focus groups were completed, the researcher conducted observations of the student participants in their inclusive environment and resource environment to observe whether those lived experiences were noted in their classes. The observations served as verification of students’ experiences in the two settings. Notes were written on the Field Notes Form (Appendix G). By directly observing students’ with disabilities behaviors and activities in both settings, a holistic perspective was developed through an understanding of the context within which the behavior operates (Stake, 1995). This perspective was especially important where it was not only the activity that was of interest, but rather how that activity fit into, or was impacted by, a sequence of events that followed. Detailed field and reflective notes were transcribed after the completion of all observations.

Data gathered from the classroom observations included the date, observation number, beginning and ending time, name of teacher, number of students present, and type of classroom setting (inclusion or resource). The purpose of observations was to collect additional data to verify what was found in the individual interviews and focus groups. Additionally, observations served to provide support to answer the three research questions:
1. Direct information about the behavior of SWD in natural, unstructured, and flexible settings.

2. Clarity regarding how SWD interact with general education teachers, special education teachers, paraeducators (if one is assigned to the classroom), and other students.

3. Observation of teaching methods with SLD students for modifications of instruction.

Observational techniques are methods by which the researcher gathered direct data on programs, processes, or behaviors being studied (Mark et al., 2010). Field notes are personal notes used to provide more in-depth background or to help to recall relevant events, if a form is not completed at the time of observation (Mark et al., 2010). Those notes contain the description of what was observed. The descriptions are factual, accurate, and thorough without being judgmental and cluttered by trivia. The date and time of the observations were recorded, and everything that was considered worth noting was included on the form (Mark et al., 2010).

Observational approaches allowed the researcher to learn about things the participants may not be aware of, or that they were unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview or focus group (Mark et al., 2010). Observations are vital data collection techniques in qualitative research. These observations were comprehensive and subjective in nature. Durkmak (2010) and Hanline (2010) used observations to measure the frequency of interactions between students and teachers and interactions with other students. The use of observations in this study were similar to the aforementioned studies in nature because they sought to uncover valuable information by watching student interactions with teachers and peers within the two settings of inclusion and resource (Durkmak, 2010; Hanline, 2010).

Since interviews and focus groups were conducted first, the researcher was familiar with participants and able to identify the students in either the inclusion classroom or the resource
classroom without interrupting instruction to complete the observation. The following data collection procedures were adhered to:

1. Each participant’s class schedule, room number, date, and time was given to the researcher with a map of the school for ease in transitioning from one location to the next.

2. Then a master schedule for all participants was created to determine their specific locations and time during the day in inclusion classrooms and resource classrooms. The schedule indicated whether the classroom was an inclusion classroom or resource classroom.

3. Both general education teachers and special education teachers were given a copy of the master schedule indicating the weeks when the researcher visited each school and each classroom but not the exact time or date.

During the observations in the inclusion classroom and the resource classroom, extensive notes were taken on the Field Notes Form in Appendix G (Mark et al., 2010). Participants’ interactions with other students and teachers were noted. In several instances, a substitute teacher was present during the absence of general education and special education teachers. Other observations included participants’ responses to questions posed by the teacher or questions posed by students. Facial expressions, movement within the classroom, completion of individual and group work, engagement in conversations in a group setting, disruptions by special education students, and general education students’ reactions to participants in the classroom were also observed and recorded. The researcher conducted observations within the classes of participants for 10-15 minute periods on two separate occasions for each student for a
total of 20 observations. Observations occurred randomly at different times throughout the school day.

The procedure for recording the observations depended less on creating a word-by-word record and more emphasis was on the notes taken on the Field Notes Form. The act of recording reflective notes or memos during data collection and analysis is called memoing (Groenewald, 2008). Memos were written regarding information that might need further exploration, and serve as written reminders for only the study’s use.

Those memos add to the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Groenewald, 2008). Memoing aids the analysis in that the researcher records the meanings derived from the data. There were no rules pertaining to memoing, however, each memo contained one idea, dated and referenced, or even a diagram. Memos evolved as the research proceeded (Groenewald, 2008). A memo log is composed to bracket out any personal biases and perceptions, according to Moustakas (1994).

**Data Analysis**

Using MAXqda was an efficient and effective means for storing and locating qualitative data and was used for qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2014). In-depth interviews and focus groups are an effective way of capturing the knowledge, interpretations, and opinions of single or multiple individuals at once (Glozah, 2015). MAXqda supports working with data material that combines the voices of more than one person with new analytical tools. Each participant was treated as a single case, giving the researcher access to the powerful spectrum of MAXqda retrieval and visual tools for each single person interview and for each focus group at once. Creative coding supported overall open coding and helped to build categories that are visually arranged with structured codes and themes. Relations were created via drag and drop and the
finalized structure was transformed into the MAXqda code system that the researcher used to perform data analysis (Glozah, 2015). Digital recording was used and brief notes were taken during the interviews and focus groups rather than rely upon memory alone to expand and clarify the notes soon after the interview (Mark et al., 2010). This approach was useful and helpful to review comments that seemed unclear in the notes. Where more complex questions are involved, effective note-taking was achieved (Mark et al., 2010).

The data in this qualitative study were also analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative approach is a technique originally described by Glaser and Straus (1967). The constant comparative data analysis was chosen as the manual method for this study until data saturation was reached (Putten & Nolen, 2010). After having read through each interview, notes written on the field notes form were examined with added comments, observations, and questions that emerged as “interesting, potentially relevant, or important” to this study (Merriam, 1998, p. 181). Constant comparative methods allowed the researcher to use a pre-existing or emergent theory against which to test all new pieces of data collected. Phenomenological approaches typically challenge the researcher to set aside or bracket all such preconceptions so data can provide new descriptions and validate theories (Thorne, 2000).

Data analysis required the researcher become immersed in the data. The purpose of data analysis, according to Banonis (1989), was to preserve the uniqueness of each participant’s lived experiences while permitting an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This process began with listening to participants’ verbal descriptions followed by reading and rereading the verbatim transcriptions or written responses. This in-depth examination of the data allowed the identification and extraction of significant statements (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011).
Those statements were recorded and later color coded onto a table as a method of organization for ease of use later in the process. Apprehending or capturing the essential relationships among the statements and preparing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon constituted the final phase. Through free imaginative variation, connections were made between statements obtained in the interview process. It was critical to identify how statements or central themes emerged and were connected to one another to ensure that the final description was comprehensive and exhaustive (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011).

Data analysis consisted mainly of major themes regarding knowledge, benefits, limitations, and suggestions for improvement. Analysis of the transcribed data included coding of major themes in the interviews. Only relevant themes evident in the interviews were reported and discussed. Implications for the resource educational setting and inclusive setting and further research were included in the analysis process. Data analysis strategies included: (a) interviews, (b) student focus groups, and (c) observations.

**Interviews Analysis**

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by comparing them to the digital recordings after the transcription process. Next, the researcher imported the transcriptions into MAXqda to discover common themes, codes, and categories (Creswell, 2014). The *a priori* and deductively coded themes and definitions were entered into MAXqda and the researcher defined categories and subcategories that referred to specific dimensions or aspects of the themes (Glozah, 2015). This step was followed by open or inductive coding that involved creating subcategories. Open coding continued until a point where no new properties, dimensions, interactions, and consequences were identified through data saturation (Glozah, 2015).
Focus Groups Analysis

Both focus group discussions at each high school were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. A focus group is a small group of five to six people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator (Eliot & Associates, 2005). All of the ninth grade SWD at two high schools were invited to participate in this study, with the anticipation of obtaining 12 participants at both high schools. The researcher over-invited participants in anticipation of a no-show rate of 10 to 20 percent (Eliot & Associates, 2005). However, only six participants volunteered from Barron High School and four participants volunteered from Cannon High School.

Both focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim with inserted notes into the transcribed data where appropriate. The researcher analyzed the transcripts by stripping off non-essential words by simultaneously assigning each participant’s comment on a separate line on the page as a new thought or idea. Each line was labeled with the participant’s pseudonym. The entire transcribed script was entered into MAXqda computer program. Then the themes were identified across the data noting which attributes were said by multiple focus group members. When all comments were entered, common categories or themes were sought across the entries for each question. Categories were arranged from those with the largest number of entries to the smallest. Sub-category heading titles were added. A short paragraph was written summarizing findings for each sub-category possibly noting similarities and differences among participants. Some quotes were added to each sub-section for the major findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
Observations Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined observation as “the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (p. 79). Observations enabled the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a written photograph of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). DeMunck and Sobo (1998) described participant observation as the primary method that anthropologists used during fieldwork. Fieldwork involves “active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. vii). Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. The context for development of sampling guidelines and interview guides is another part of the process for field work (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

The following data analysis procedures were followed for observations:

1. After the completion of all observations, the researcher transcribed all field notes regarding each participant’s classroom reactions in the inclusion classroom and resource classroom.

2. A comparison of those notes was made with participants’ interviews and their perceptions from the focus group to determine similarities and differences in both environmental settings.

3. Comparisons from the field notes were also made regarding students’ reactions in the inclusion classroom and the resource classroom.

Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) declared that good field notes use exact quotes when possible, and use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality:
1. Describe activities in the order in which they occur.
2. Provide descriptions without inferring meaning.
3. Include relevant background information to situate the event.
4. Separate one’s own thoughts and assumptions from what is actually observed.
5. Record the date, time, place, and name of researcher on each set of notes (p. 51).

Regarding coding observation notes, DeMunck and Sobo (1998) suggest that coding is used to select and emphasize information that is important enough to record. In this way, the researcher separated extraneous information and focused observations on the type of information needed for the study. DeMunck and Sobo described codes as:

…rules for organizing symbols into larger and more meaningful strings of symbols. It is important, no imperative, to construct a coding system not because the coding system represents the ‘true’ structure of the process you are studying, but because it offers a framework for organizing and thinking about the data (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998, p. 48).

Kutsche (1998) stated that when trying to analyze interview information and observation field notes, the researcher attempted to develop a model that helps to make sense of what participants do. An outline of the information was set and the researcher organized the information according to the outline, then moved the points around as the argument of the study dictated. Kutsche further suggested that the researcher organizes the collected data into a narrative in which one may tell the story of a day or a week in the lives of participants. Once the data were organized in this way, there may be several sections in the narrative that reflected participants’ interpretation of certain themes to help ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1994).
Trustworthiness

In this study, the process of data triangulation was used to confirm the data from multiple sources and with a variety of procedural steps (Ary et al., 2006). Those multiple data sources were: (a) interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) observations. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) provided examples of a qualitative multiple case study to illustrate the specific strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of a study.

The criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, and (c) dependability and confirmability, all form the framework for determining the rigor of the research. The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to support the argument that the findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). To establish trustworthiness, the coding system was tested in this study using MAXqda program to code a group of responses and a comparison was made to determine repetition of coding (Houghton et al., 2013). Adjustments were made to the codes and categorical groups based on the findings of the peer-review pre-research study and the actual study (Washburn-Moses et al., 2013).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the value and believability of the findings (Leininger, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2006). Credibility involves two processes of conducting the research in a credible manner and demonstrating integrity. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a credible theoretical interpretation of the data drawn from the participants’ original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296).
Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability compare the concept of reliability in quantitative research and refer to how stable are the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Rolfe, 2006; Shah & Corley, 2006; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection and data analysis. Theory generation is derived from the dependability of a study. Confirmability refers to the impartiality and accuracy of the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004) and is closely related to dependability. The processes for establishing both are similar. Confirmability is a measure of how well the inquiry’s findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether or not particular findings can be transferred to another similar context or situation. It preserves the meanings and inferences from the completed study (Leininger, 1994). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of an inquiry apply or transfer beyond the bounds of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards for the reporting and publishing of scientific information (standards 5.01-5.10 and 6.06) as listed in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2011) were followed to minimize possible risk to research participants in this study. All information collected is confidential. In addition, all national, state, and local regulations regarding confidentiality were followed.

After submitting an application to the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University, approval to conduct this study was granted prior to the collection of research data (see IRB Approval #2567.081116 in Appendix J). The superintendent of the school district granted
approval along with the two high school principals who granted access to their sites and participant access (see Appendices B, C, and I). After meeting with the parents and the students at the two high schools, 10 students and their parents granted permission through informed consent forms to participate in this study. Parents and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any undue consequences affecting students’ grades and enrollment at the high schools (see Appendix A). Voluntary participation meant that students could withdraw from the study before and during the study. Parents could withdraw their children from the study without any explanation and at any time. No compensation is provided to parents of participants or participants in this study nor to principals, teachers, or staff at the school district and school levels.

Per federal regulations and to secure both physical and electronic data, all data including hard copies of interviews, focus group discussions, and observations will be destroyed 3 years after the completion of this study. With the growing use of portable data storage devices as an accepted reality in society, all data are stored on a personal USB flash drive and the researcher’s desktop computer with encrypted storage and password access to both devices (GFI Software, 2010). The portable data storage device in common use today is the USB flash drive or thumb drive or memory stick (PCTechGuide, 2009). To mitigate the possible security threats of the USB flash drive, the information was encrypted and password protected (Knott & Steube, 2011).

To protect data initially obtained from the high schools include individually identifiable information such as student names and/or identifiers assigned by the schools, a series of safeguards were put in place to assure that confidential information was not compromised (Allegheny Intermediate Unit, 2008). The appropriate steps were taken to obtain specific clearance for all phases of the study. Defined procedures were adhered to ensure that all
identifying information for the school district, schools, and participants were changed to provide anonymity. All data electronic and hard copy files are stored in encrypted form and password protection before transmission to the researcher from the school’s database and saved on a password protected USB flash drive that is kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s residence.

**Summary**

Chapter three contains an overview of the study followed by a description of the research design, a central research question and three sub-questions, setting, and participants. The procedures followed were presented and the researcher’s role was discussed. Data collection consisted of 10 interviews, two student focus groups, and 20 observations. A peer-review pre-research study with three special education teachers who were not part of the actual study was conducted to validate the interview questions. Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis and using MAXqda data analysis program. Trustworthiness was explained to ensure the credibility, transferability, and dependability and confirmability of this study. Ethical considerations were addressed describing the protection of the confidentiality of student data and protecting the rights of participants in this study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter four contains descriptions of the participants in this study, the results of the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and two observations per student are presented. A qualitative analysis was employed to analyze the data gathered with the help of the computer software program MAXqda. A systematic analysis was utilized to extract new meanings from the shared responses of ninth grade SWD and to seek answers addressing the sub-questions of the study. Those sub-questions were posed to listen to the voices of SWD to gain an understanding of their perceptions of their instructional settings. Theme development presents the themes and sub-themes based on the study findings. The summary provides the restatement of the results in this study.

Participants

The participants in this study are 10 ninth grade SWD at two rural high schools in Southeastern Georgia. They are between ages 14 and 16 years old. Criteria for participants included being currently enrolled or previously enrolled in inclusion and resource settings to receive special education services. There are seven males and three females who volunteered to participate in this study.

Adam

Adam is a small statured and appropriately groomed young man. He is also polite and smiles a lot, seems comfortable, and confident in the co-taught classroom setting. He attempts all activities given to him eagerly, and gets along well with his peers and teachers. Although Adam is playful at times and seems to enjoy interactive classroom activities, he is an ambitious student who had a zeal for learning. Adam demonstrates appropriate behavior in the classroom.
He is willing to help others and is often called on to assist the teacher in the classroom. Even though he struggles academically, he is determined and willing to learn new things. In English language arts, Adam has difficulty producing constructive writing that demonstrates a clear main idea or purpose and with proper punctuation. Producing a writing sample that demonstrates accurate spelling and the use of correct punctuation and grammar is also one of Adam’s deficiencies.

Adam has difficulty remembering math facts; therefore, a calculator is needed to complete any assignments involving mathematical calculations because he does not process information as fast as others. One of Adam’s strengths is his basic number sense. Adam processes information at a slower rate than his peers. Reinforcement of skills from the special education teacher throughout the instructional class period is required for Adam to complete his work.

Anna

Anna is an average size student who is well groomed. Although Anna’s mother was concerned with her inability to get along with other students, Anna is happy when she talks with her friends. However, due to her problems with social interaction, she is best served in a smaller setting. Her mother agrees with teachers that Anna benefits from a smaller class size. She struggles with being distracted by any extraneous stimuli. Anna could be quite pleasant and personable at times. In reading comprehension, Anna discriminates between fact and fiction, and she recognizes that stories contain a beginning, middle, and end. Her academic strength is in written expression because she enjoys it.

With increased structure, Anna behaves appropriately and seeks assistance with difficult tasks or situations. In math, Anna could add and subtract multi-digit numbers. Anna has
difficulty sustaining attention to a task, remembering information, and mathematical reasoning. Those deficits impact her involvement and progress in all of her classes. Although Anna is intimidated by math and requires coaxing to complete assignments, she also struggles with maintaining relationships with some teachers which result in being redirected often.

Arnold

Arnold smiles a lot and is generally polite to his teachers. He is an active participant in class and seems happy during instruction. However Arnold seems annoyed when teachers have to stop teaching to reprimand other students. He is a tall boy with a soft voice who gets along with his peers. Arnold also enjoys playing football and participating in the Navy Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC). Teachers indicated that he adjusts well since moving to this area and that he is a hard worker. He demonstrates age appropriate adaptive skills in all areas, with social skills and adaptability falling slightly above the average range. His adaptive skills are slightly better than the typical student his age in the areas of social and adaptability and coping skills.

In class, Arnold paid attention and took detailed notes. Arnold is better able to participate when materials are read aloud and discussed in class. He asks questions when he does not understand the material and he often seeks assistance from support staff to ensure that he appropriately responds to assigned writing tasks. Arnold is receptive to suggestions on how to further expand his answers to reflect his understanding of a topic. When lengthy passages are read to him so that he could process the text, he performs well. A separate room is required when he is tested, so the oral reading of test material does not distract other students. Arnold is determined to complete all assignments but could not always detect his errors. Arnold has extremely low verbal comprehension skills, and his overall cognitive skills are below average.
Arnold performs better on tasks that include a visual component and when directions are kept simple and concise.

**Bruce**

Bruce is an average sized student who is well groomed. Bruce wants to be a police officer when he graduates from high school. He wants to also play sports. His teachers report that Bruce rarely requires redirection in class for his behavior. Additionally, his teachers report that he always has his homework and infrequently misses assignments. Although the teachers reported no behavior problems at school, Bruce’s parents are concerned about his behavior at school. They worry about him cutting class. His parents report that Bruce stutters when he is being not truthful. Overall, Bruce’s parents are optimistic about his current progress in class and are proud that he made the A and B honor roll. Teachers describe Bruce’s parents as quite supportive, which keeps him on track academically and behaviorally.

Bruce is respectful and quiet in class. According to his English language arts teacher, he engages well with his group members during small group activities. However, teachers indicated that Bruce benefits most from one-on-one instruction. Bruce’s teachers share that he participates in class discussions and activities but has trouble asking questions in class or asking for help when needed. Also, Bruce did not like to maintain eye contact. Teachers found that Bruce often underestimated the time required to complete a task and the level of difficulty of the task, which often lead to him being unable to complete an assignment within the allotted time.

**Carl**

Carl is an average size student who was well groomed. He enjoys band and plays the saxophone. He is described as often quiet and disengaged in class. He wears hoodies to class and pull them over his head when he is disinterested. Recalling key elements of a story and
historical facts are weaknesses for Carl. However, teachers report that his recall skills have improved since the beginning of the year. Completing assigned tasks on time is difficult for Carl. When completing language activities involving more difficult concepts and vocabulary, Carl sometimes gets upset and says, “It is too hard.” As a result, he sometimes shuts down and refuses to complete assignments. He experiences difficulty starting a task, remaining on task, and completing a task.

Carl could not make inferences when reading grade-level material. He had difficulty performing long division problems. Blocking out background activity was also difficult for him. Teachers reported that Carl does not possess the skills needed to successfully interact with his peers in structured and unstructured settings, which negatively impacted his ability to participate in classroom tasks and activities. At times, Carl loses his temper in class but could also be cooperative and helpful, especially when taught individually or with just one or two other students.

**Gregory**

Gregory is an average sized, well-groomed student who did not interact a lot with his peers but seemed to get along well with them when he did. He is polite and responsive to his teachers. He nodded and dozed off at times and was quiet when he was not sleeping. Unless someone directly addressed him, Gregory did not speak openly to others, although he had a good disposition. Playing competitive games or team activities were means to obtain his full attention in class.

Gregory has weak reading fluency skills. It is difficult for him to identify the main idea and supporting details within a paragraph. His reading deficits also include the inability to state the meanings of unfamiliar words by using contextual clues. In math, Gregory struggles with
multistep word problems and he is still learning multiplication facts. Additionally, recalling rules and applications in math is difficult for him. When given the opportunity to use his notes to solve problems, he is usually successful.

Jeanne

Jeanne is 14 years old and has a teacher who took a genuine interest in her, even outside of the classroom. The teacher invited her to be a part of her non-profit organization. According to Jeanne’s mother, her case manager is not doing an adequate job. Several meetings were held about his data collection about Jeanne, according to her IEP. Jeanne is only served in math. Jeanne’s inattentiveness and impulsivity cause her have difficulty recalling math facts. She also has difficulty with multiplication, math reasoning, and word problems.

While Jeanne demonstrates some growth in her overall math skills, there is some inconsistency between her performance at home and what was reported via IEP data collection from the teacher. Jeanne was intimidated by complex math concepts. Jeanne has stronger academic skills in the area of reading and writing. She is able to write grade-level appropriate paragraphs. Jeanne is sociable and friendly with others. She has no socialization issues with her peers, but she is easily influenced by others. At times, Jeanne uses her positive relationships with teachers to get out of completing assignments that she believes are too challenging.

Patricia

Patricia is a tall student. She is well groomed and seems to get along with her peers. She laughs a lot and seems happy overall. Patricia did not seem interested in doing her work but clearly had positive relationships with adults. Patricia has age-appropriate social skills and could be quite focused when working on preferred activities. Patricia’s teachers describe her as a
charming young lady who is also sensitive and lacks confidence. Teachers reported that Patricia exhibits low self-esteem at home and at school. Patricia told teachers that her peers and siblings frequently tease her for academic difficulties in reading and math. She likes cheerleading and enjoys receiving pencils or school supplies as rewards at school. Working alone is uncomfortable for Patricia, and she needs significant accommodations to understand most reading and math concepts. Repetition and drill to maintain learned skills work best for Patricia. She has significant deficiencies in reading and math and requires substantial accommodations to be successful. Patricia often asks for assistance and is always a self-advocate regarding her academic activities.

Ralph

Ralph is a large student who is not well-groomed. His clothes do not fit him. Ralph was highly distracted and fidgety. He seems to be somewhat aggressive when speaking to others but also held his head down a lot when talking. He did not appear to have any of his own materials for class (i.e., paper and pencils). Ralph seeks the attention of his peers with some of his actions however the actions displayed are not positive.

In general, teachers reported that Ralph is well liked by his peers. Academically, Ralph’s teachers described him as an emerging reader and writer. He was able to sound out words using phonics. Ralph strength is in math. He enjoys math and could be found doing math problems in his spare time. Though he experiences problems with reading, Ralph tries hard. As a result, he has made progress with his reading this school year. However, overall his reading remains far below grade level, which hinders his progress in all his other classes. Ralph demonstrates significant weaknesses grasping more complex concepts and vocabulary, following multi-step directions, and answering comprehension questions.
Zachary

Zachary is an average sized student and he is well groomed. Music and video games are his main interests. He seems quiet and requires a lot of prompting to interact with adults. At times, he does not ask for help and appears disinterested in the class. According to his teachers, Zachary is more engaged with interactive lessons, and seems to thrive on healthy competition. He demonstrates a positive attitude toward learning overall. He also demonstrates good decision-making skills and satisfactory peer relationships. Zachary is a hard worker who puts forth a lot effort to ensure his work is accurate and complete.

Zachary requires extra support in reading comprehension. Based on recent ELA assessments, he has difficulty determining the central idea of a text and recognizing key details. Zachary is easily distracted in large inclusion classes. Teachers reported that Zachary seems to function better in small classes because directions often needed to be repeated for him to understand the expectations of an assignment. In math, Zachary interprets and computes quotients of fractions and solves word problems involving division of fractions by fractions. Zachary benefits from small groups because he remains focused on math problems that require him to use multiple steps. All participants are outlined in Table 8.
Table 8

*Demographics for Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnold</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>Cannon High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanne</td>
<td>Cannon High School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>Barron High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>Cannon High School</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

Initial open manual coding was used as the first approach to analyze the qualitative data gathered from interviews, focus groups, and observations (Gonzalez, 2016). The following codes, as shown in Table 9, emerged after sorting, condensing, rereading, counting, and eliminating repetitive codes identified initially during open coding. Initially, there were three themes and no sub-themes under Interviews (Themes: Not Enough Help from Teachers, Differences in Settings: Inclusion and Resource, and Working Preferences), five themes and no sub-themes under Focus Groups (Not Enough Help from Teachers, Differences in Settings: Inclusion and Resource, and Working Preferences, Most and Least Preferred Instructional Activities, and Embarrassed Asking for Help), and six themes and no sub-themes under Observations (Disrespect towards Substitute Teachers, Disruptive Students, Resource Setting...
and Special Education Teachers, Easily Distracted by Noise, Co-teaching Models, and Non-engagement in Class).

During the second iteration, this same revised coding scheme of all data sources was used. Three major themes with sub-themes emerged: Theme 1: Teacher-student Relationships (Help with School Work, Working Preferences, Teachers Care, Favorite Teacher to Teach You, and Do Not Like Teacher); Theme 2: Differences in Settings: Inclusion and Resource (Most and Least Preferred Instructional Activities, Embarrassed Asking for Help and Name Calling, and Grades and Level of Work); and Theme 3: Teacher Efficacy (Disrespect towards Substitute Teachers, Disruptive Students, Easily Distracted by Noise, Co-teaching Models, and Non-engagement in Class).

The last iteration contained three themes with two sub-themes for under each major theme. Theme 1: Teacher-student Relationships (Help with School Work and Impactful Teacher Traits); Theme 2: Classroom Climate (Instructional Elements and Embarrassment—Negative Perceptions of Other SWD); and Theme 3: Perceived Teacher Efficacy (Behavior Management and Understanding of Co-teaching Models).

During individual interviews, participants had more opportunities to talk freely and often repeated themselves. During the interviews, participants were not able to hear what the other student said as in the focus groups, and therefore were not able to feed off the other students to reinforce what they said. Consequently, there were greater levels of repetitions of what occurred in the individual interviews than during the focus groups. For example, the theme, “Not Getting Enough Help from Teachers” was mentioned 71 times during individual interviews, 20 times in the focus groups, and 25 times in the observations.
The second highest frequency levels of themes occurred during the sub-theme “Help with School Work” in the interviews, focus groups, and observations. Participants mentioned factors related to this sub-theme 28 times each in the interviews and focus groups and 30 times during the observations.

The third highest frequency levels of themes occurred during the sub-theme “Classroom Climate”, which was mentioned 73 times during the interviews and only twice during observations. Participants mentioned factors related to the sub-theme “Instructional Practices” 25 times during the interviews, and it was seen once during observations. Being “Embarrassed—Negative Perceptions of Other SWD” sub-theme was mentioned three times during observations.

The fourth highest frequency levels of themes occurred during “Theme 3: Perceived Teacher Efficacy.” This theme included sub-theme “Disrespect towards Substitute Teachers” with related factors mentioned 45 times during interviews, 8 times during focus groups, and was seen 10 times in observations. Also “Disruptive Peers” was a sub-theme that fell under “Teacher Efficacy”, and it was seen 15 times during observations.

The researcher used a descriptive transcendental phenomenological approach in this study to describe ninth grade SWD experiences with two different educational settings (i.e., inclusion and resource). Descriptive transcendental phenomenology attempts to explore and discover a fresh perspective of ninth grade students’ with disabilities voices, eliminating all researcher bias, prejudgment, and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994).

The creation codes within categories for the subcodes of high, medium, and low for evaluative content analysis was done in MAXqda (Kuckartz, 2010). The major codes and anchor examples became code memos. Then, the material was worked through manually, meaning that
each interview, focus group, and observation were read line by line. The text segments that had to do with teacher efficacy were identified and then coded with the appropriate code (e.g., high teacher efficacy).

After coding the appropriate text segments, the code was transformed into a categorical variable by right-clicking on the code and selecting the appropriate option in the menu that appears. After this option was selected, MAXqda was use to perform the following actions: (a) a new categorical variable was created in the List of Variables with the name of the code that it was created from (in this case, “Teacher efficacy”), (b) all cases (documents) in the Document System were evaluated. That meant that each case was assigned as having “high,” “medium,” “low,” or “undefined” teacher efficacy or left blank. If a subcode was used more than the others in a case, that case received that label. If there were two or more subcodes used the same numbers of time, it was labeled “undefined.” If none of the subcodes were used at all, no value was assigned (Kuckartz, 2010).

The use of MAXqda (qualitative data analysis, version 12) software allowed for organizing and analyzing code frequency shown in Table 9 to create co-occurring open codes and code families to see emerging themes found in the last iteration. This process also allowed for more concise categories of themes and sub-themes. As a result, the number of times that those themes and sub-themes were mentioned by study participants was recorded under the data sources of interviews, focus groups, and observations. Continued analysis of data sources using MAXqda software showed descriptive code frequency across all data sources for further analytic reduction. Open codes supporting the three identified themes are displayed in Table 9, with their frequency codes across the data sources. The researcher created Table 9.
Table 9

*Iterations of Themes and Sub-Themes*

| Theme 1: Not Enough Help from Teachers |
| Theme 2: Differences in Settings |
| Theme 3: Working Preferences |
| Theme 4: Most & Least Preferred Instructional Activities |
| Theme 5: Embarrassed Asking for Help |
| Theme 6: Disrespect Subs |
| Theme 7: Resource Setting & Special Ed. |
| Theme 8: Easily Distracted by Noise |
| Theme 9: Co-teaching Models |
| Theme 10: Non-engagement in Class |

**Theme Development**

The process of bracketing and identifying themes and sub-themes followed the data collection garnered from the 10 ninth grade SWD using these data sources: (a) interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) observations. According to Moustakas (1994), the first step in the data analysis structure is the overall process of bracketing that is suspending and setting aside any biases, daily understandings, theories, beliefs, habitual modes of thought, and judgments from the phenomenon under study. This process is known as *epoche*´ in the literature (Chan et al., 2013). The analysis of cause and effect must be bracketed to understand the phenomenon as it shows itself that is part of the larger process of *epoche*´ (Chan et al., 2013).
During qualitative data analysis, the researcher used Moustakas’ (1994) seven steps: (a) familiarization, (b) compilation of answers, (c) condensation or reduction, (d) classification, (e) preliminary comparison of categories, (f) naming of categories, and (g) contrastive comparison of categories (Moustakas, 1994). Those steps were used to analyze the current study’s qualitative research data sources. The data from each interview, focus group, and observations were read completely seven times before beginning the process of what Creswell (2013) identified as horizontalization. Creswell referred to horizontalization as identification of themes or “significant statements relevant to the topic” (p. 284). After significant statements were identified and coded several times and preliminary grouping was completed, the researcher removed repetitive statements or nonessential statements that did not contribute to the overall themes and sub-themes (Moustakas, 1994). This process allowed for open codes to be continually revised through four iterations until smaller codes were combined into larger categories and themes. Finally, three themes with two sub-themes each were formulated from the data analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

The following themes emerged from the overall findings according to the voices of participants from the two high schools. Table 10 shows the last stage of iterations and an overview of themes and sub-themes found in this study.
Theme 1: Teacher-student relationships. Students with disabilities enrolled in ninth grade described their experiences in two educational settings (i.e., inclusion and resource). They faced a variety of challenges within those settings such as receiving insufficient help with school work in inclusion and developing relationships with their teachers and peers. Yet, student participants also viewed school as important and had well-defined ideas about what they needed in class from their teachers. They desired structured and comfortable classes that were interactive and fun. Each participant was able to give exact examples of what they perceived as desired and undesired teacher qualities or behavior that created an illustration of what teacher-student relationships in the classroom setting meant to them.

Student participants clearly identified positive and negative aspects of their relationships with their teachers. Students described receiving more support and gaining a better understanding of skills taught in the resource setting. However, they also defined behaviors within the inclusive setting that they felt were helpful to their learning. Students attributed characteristics of caring and concern to teachers who took the time to repeat directions or reteach information to them. Additionally, students respected and liked the teachers that they felt treated
them like ‘everyone else’ and did not get upset when they asked questions. Students described feeling comfortable in the inclusive classes where teachers slowed down enough for them to take meaningful notes and gave them the opportunity to work in a variety of ways, including by themselves, if that was their preference. Furthermore, students demonstrated respectful and cooperative behaviors towards their assigned teachers who displayed positive characteristics, in stark contrast to how many of them interacted with substitutes and teachers with negative attributes during observations.

Students did not develop relationships they perceived as good with teachers who yelled a lot, taught too quickly, got an attitude when they asked questions, and embarrassed them in front of their peers. Further, students were concerned about the level of support they did or did not receive from certain teachers. Students shared specific thoughts regarding specific teacher behaviors that helped them learn new concepts, as well as those that made them feel left behind. Students did not develop positive relationships with teachers they viewed as uncaring and intentionally unhelpful.

During the focus group discussion, all SWD in this study said in unison, “No, we’re not getting enough help” with school work from teachers in inclusion classes. Jeanne and Patricia stated, “There are too many students, sometimes 20 to 30, in the inclusion classes and the teachers complained that they could not help all students.” Students in the current study, overall, wanted teachers to explain lesson expectations in more detail, and break the lesson down into steps so they could understand what they were saying. Carl stated that teachers should walk around and help them rather than sit on a stool the entire lesson or sit in a chair in the back of the room and do nothing. Carl said, “All she does is sit down on that stool. I wish that stool would break.”
Arnold, Gregory, Zachary, Carl, Patricia, Anna, and Jeanne reported that teachers in the inclusion class “go too fast and students are not able to keep up with their notes.” Arnold shared, “But sometimes they go too fast. I ask them to repeat it when they go too fast and repeat what they said.” Gregory said, “Sometimes my teachers go too fast. I have to ask them to go back a lot.” Zachary felt the reason that he needed more help was because he “missed a lot of days out of school due to absences and missing the bus when I oversleep. It’s hard to catch up on the work I missed in the big class because they go real fast.” Carl solemnly said, “It’s harder to learn in the big class. In the big class, they go too fast and do not give us a chance to catch up on our notes.” Patricia and Carl said, “I don’t like Ms. K’s teaching ways. She is mean.” Anna and Arnold agreed, “She gives us book and board work. She goes too fast on notes.”

Jeanne stated:

Some of the other teachers go too fast. In the big class, they get mad if you ask questions. If there is a question and the answer is in the textbook, they will tell you that it’s in the book. If you don’t understand or don’t know how to read they still don’t help you.

Zachary shared that he prefers small classes because there are “fewer people in there so you can work together and you can become friends and help other people out.”

Several of the students liked their school and their teachers while others disliked their school and their teachers. Three students (i.e., Arnold, Jeanne, and Ralph) liked their teachers and four students (i.e., Bruce, Carl, Patricia, and Ralph) said, “Some care.” Five students (i.e., Anna, Bruce, Carl, Patricia, and Ralph) disliked the same teacher and one teacher was disliked by all students. Arnold defended one of the teachers whom others disliked and provided his
reason for their dislike of her; stating, “We don’t do fun stuff because we throw paper on the floor, eat candy, and cuss.”

All of the students expressed concerns regarding the number of students in their inclusion classes, with class sizes ranging from 20-30 students. Jeanne and Carl explained that “teachers could not get around to helping every student needing help.” Ultimately, they were extremely aware of the effort that some teachers made to support all students and the lack of support other teachers gave. They appreciated the teachers who tried to help them but recognized that the task was difficult.

On the other hand, students did enjoy working with certain teachers. Several students in both schools named the same teacher as their favorite. In general, student participants concluded that teachers they preferred attempted to help all students diligently throughout each class session. One of Jeanne’s teachers sat her next to the desk so Jeanne could stay focused and do better on her work. Jeanne was happy about that, and said it showed her that her teacher cared for her. Ralph added, “My teachers care about me and help me.” Patricia agreed with Bruce and Carl stated, “Yes, some care.” Descriptions such as “She’s nice to me”; “She goes back when I ask her to”; and “She always helps me” were used when students mentioned teachers they preferred. Study participants believed that these traits were indicators that these preferred teachers really wanted them to learn. Therefore, they developed good working relationships with those teachers. Furthermore, their recognition of their teachers’ desire to help everyone allowed them to be understanding when they realized that the teachers were having difficulty supporting all the students in class.

Study participants did not prefer teachers who embarrassed them in class. Students stated that they were embarrassed when teachers “got an attitude when they asked for help”, or as
Jeanne said that some teachers did not help them at all but told them to look in the textbook for the answer. Carl said “some teachers are here for a check, that’s why we don’t do fun stuff.” Students associated those behaviors with a lack of caring and a general disinterest in whether they learned anything or not. Patricia, Anna, Bruce, Carl, and Ralph agreed, “Ms. T needs to explain more” and “She really doesn’t do much.” Carl said, “All she does is sit down on that stool. I wish that stool would break.” Patricia chimed in and said, “She cops an attitude when I ask her for help. She is nasty and can’t read.” Anna replied, “Yeah, she struggles like me.” In another incident, Bruce stated that Mr. C “needs to understand personal space. I don’t like how he talks to me.” Patricia and Carl said, “I don’t like Ms. K’s teaching ways. She is mean.” Anna and Arnold agreed, “She gives us book and board work. She goes too fast on notes.”

During the analysis of data from all sources in this study, two sub-themes emerged that supported the major theme teacher-student relationships: (a) help with school work, and (b) impactful teacher traits.

**Sub-Theme 1: Help with school work.** Based on the data from the major theme in this study, students’ feelings about not getting enough help were confirmed. The majority of students reported that they received more help in the resource classes due to the small number of students. In contrast, they reported that they did not receive enough help in the inclusion class because there were sometimes 30 students and teachers could not get around to helping everyone. Also, students did not like or respect the teachers who did not assist them, walk around the class offering students help, embarrassed them in front of their peers, and sent them out of class. Students make associations and develop positive relationships with teachers whom they perceive as ‘caring’ and ‘helpful’. Ralph shared, “My teachers care about me and help me.” Jeanne said, “I sit next to my teacher’s desk to stay focused and that shows he cares for me.”
Sub-Theme 2: Impactful teacher traits. Students’ perception of teacher behaviors within the classroom impacted them greatly. Positive and negative traits impacted students’ relationships with teachers. Specific teachers in both were described as “good teachers who knew how to break information down, and give it to you straight...classic.” Students formed positive perceptions of teachers based on how much they showed they cared by doing the following: (a) helping them when they asked for help, (b) repeating information, (c) assisting them in understanding the lesson, (d) sitting students next to them, (e) pointing out incorrect answers, (f) explaining the lesson, (g) slowing down so they can take notes to help them study for and pass tests, and (h) allowing them to ask questions during the lesson to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. Conversely, the opposite happened when teachers showed an uncaring and negative attitude toward SWD.

Theme 2: Classroom climate. All of the students in this study referred to the resource class as the “small class” and the inclusion class as the “large class.” Classroom climate was a critical part of how SWD viewed their environment. At the present time, SWD in this study have no voice in their educational placements (i.e., inclusion and resource). Students’ IEPs are reviewed annually and during those meetings the IEP team determines their educational placement. Participants in this study have not historically participated in their IEP meetings or placement decisions. While students’ perceptions of inclusive and general education environments were investigated in this study, there are few recent studies that investigated students’ perceptions of their engagement in those environments. However, participants in this study expressed distinct factors that they liked or disliked about their classes. The students were extremely cognizant of differences between the inclusive and resource settings. Their views on the “feel” of their classrooms constituted the parameters of the climate of their classrooms.
When questioned on their social preferences of making friends in the current study, SWD indicated an inclination for general education settings due to enhanced social opportunities to make friends when compared to resource classrooms with fewer students and fewer opportunities to socialize with friends. Most notably, students identified factors that related to preferred instructional practices and feelings of embarrassment experienced in resource classes. Students were keenly aware of distinction they perceived between the way their teachers and peers treated them due to the varied environments. Participants were displeased when they felt that they were being treated differently by their peers and teachers. Overall, most student participants had a desire to learn and do well in class. Yet, they felt that they were not always able to demonstrate their best efforts due to the climate within their classes.

Instructional practices in the current study referred to the most and least-liked instructional activities that teachers used in both classroom settings. Instructional practices played a significant role in the development of students’ views of the climate of their classrooms. Several SWD said they wanted to have “fun and exciting activities” like they had in elementary school and middle school. In the current study, participants enjoyed making projects, taking field trips, and doing experiments. All participants agreed that “elementary and middle school were much more fun.” Gregory said, “I like graphing with food objects and taking field trips. I don’t like projects, but different hands-on activities. Now, they just want us to copy out of the book and off the board.

Carl noted that “some teachers are here for a check that’s why we don’t do fun stuff.” Bruce agreed with Carl partially and said, “Some are here for a check, but some care.” Patricia agreed with Bruce and Carl and stated, “Yes, some care.” Ralph added, “My teachers care about me and help me.” Arnold chimed in, “My teachers help me, too. I like my teachers. We don’t
have fun because we eat candy, put wrappers on the floor, and cuss.” Jeanne was quite “fond of her teachers because they showed an interest in her ability to learn.” One of Jeanne’s teachers sat her next to her desk so Jeanne could stay focused and do better on her work. Jeanne was happy that her teachers cared for her.

Patricia and Carl said, “I don’t like Ms. K’s teaching ways. She is mean.” Bruce and Arnold agreed, “She gives us book and board work”. Carl added, “Some teachers just give you packets of worksheets to complete. They do not really teach, like Ms. T.” All student participants reported that they thought their grades would improve if they had more fun activities in class. Making good grades was important to all students in this study and they agreed that they wanted to be successful in school. In general, their responses regarding preferred instructional practices had no relationship to the classroom setting in which the activities occurred.

Student participants were able to describe what they considered to be fun and engaging activities in school, as shown in Table 11. In addition to sharing that they wanted teachers to make the subjects fun, students explained their work preferences for those activities. For example, participants expressed the desire to be allowed to select the group or partner they want to work with. Gregory explained, “If you get in a group, you have to make sure that there are people in it who know what they’re talking about and understand. We could pick our own groups and not the teacher.” Adam admits to preferring to work in a small group stating, “Some people don’t do nothing but some people do work and they might know something you can get in their group and get help.” Bruce said he liked working with a partner when the classes are hard because he did not like being taught with the whole class. “Working with someone I know or someone who will do their work and not play around is what I like”, he said.
Table 11

*Most and Least Preferred Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Preferred Activities</th>
<th>Least Preferred Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing Kahoot</td>
<td>Teachers should not select partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making projects and experiments</td>
<td>Teachers should not select groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking field trips</td>
<td>Copying out of a book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting a group to work with</td>
<td>Copying off the board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting a partner</td>
<td>Packets to complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with people who understand and are focused</td>
<td>“Baby” work (i.e., simple addition facts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-on activities, for example making graphs using food objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the subjects fun and exciting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student perceptions of the classroom climate was also specifically associated with the location of their services in either an inclusion or resource setting. None of the students knew the specific purpose of the two teachers (i.e., general education and special education teachers) in the inclusion classes; however, they knew there were distinct differences in the small classes (resource) and the large classes (inclusion). They understood that the two teachers were in the same room to provide “extra help,” “to help me”, “give special help when I need it”, “help me get more exposure”, and “when one teacher did not know the answer, the other teacher knew the answer.”

All the study participants agreed that there were too many students in their larger classes. They clearly viewed the number of students in a classroom as a hindrances that changed the climate of the classroom. Several of them expressed empathy toward teachers because “it seemed hard to get to everybody.” Carl said, “I don’t blame the teachers because they are doing the best that they can but there are too many students who need help.” For example, Jeanne
seemed to understand that her teachers could not help everybody. Jeanne said that when there were two teachers in the room, the teachers could split the class up to give more students help. Jeanne especially liked when she got an opportunity to work with the special education teacher in the back of the room so he could explain and “break it down” for her. Several students stated that if they needed more help from their inclusion teachers, they just went to after school tutoring, which clearly supports their perception that they did not get the support they needed in the inclusion setting. Furthermore, students used words like “loud” and “chaos” to describe their inclusion classes; however, these descriptors were never used to describe the resource classes when the assigned teacher was present.

In resource classes, students with disabilities generally reported that teachers went slower and repeated information more often because there were fewer students. Most of Adam’s classes were small which he liked because “It helps me think better and do my work.” Students said they received more help from teachers in the resource classes than in inclusion classes. Carl commented, “Learning is slowed down in large groups (inclusion). The note taking can be too much.” Bruce agreed and stated, “Some teachers slow down and others do not.”

The majority of students in this study preferred the small class (resource) because it allowed them to receive individual attention, provided a slower pace instruction, and allowed for the repetition that they felt they needed. SWD did not feel threatened or intimidated in the smaller setting. They were allowed to ask questions and were able to take appropriate notes for to use when studying for tests. Additionally, SWD did not mention the need to attend after school tutorial for additional assistance when discussing their resource classes. Anna noted, “I get lots of help in the small class. I can learn more in there. I just like the smaller class better. You don’t learn as much in the big group. It be too much going on.” Arnold agreed, “They go
back over it.” Adam responded, “The work is more challenging in the big classes, but the teachers break it down in the small classes so it’s easier to get.”

Jeanne explained:

My first class is small with Mr. M who works with me and four other students in a small group whenever we are pulled out. I like it because I can get help. I don’t know what kind of class it is but we do all kinds of work in there.

Preferential statements about the inclusive setting from participants predominately included details related to the social aspects of that setting. Students enjoyed being around their nondisabled peers and considered many of them friends. Patricia realized that she needed more help instructionally but did like being in the “regular” class because her friends were in there. Gregory, Ralph, and Zachary also shared that they enjoyed the general education classroom where their friends are. Zachary said, “I probably like the large class best because there are more people; and the more people, the more friends I have.” Zachary said, “I learn more in the big class. I just do not like the small classes because I get bored.”

Instructional rigor refers to the level of difficulty of the work in classes based on the perceptions of student participants. The rigor of the classes also factored into the portrait student perceptions painted of the climate within the classroom settings. Carl, Bruce, and Patricia reported that the work in inclusion classes was “too difficult and above their level” and the work in the self-contained resource classes were “on their level.” Carl commented, “Learning is slowed down in large groups (inclusion). The note taking can be too much.” Bruce agreed, “Some teachers slow down and others do not.” Patricia added, “Half the time they do not even do nothing with the notes.”
The majority of the SWD in this study reported that their classes were on their level, if they were in a resource class. General education classes were described as “above their level” and difficult because for example, Patricia stated that teachers do not like to answer questions. Zachary requires directions to be repeated, according to his IEP and he confirmed this need in his interview. Arnold and Gregory said they often had to ask teachers to repeat what they said. Ralph and Zachary mentioned that they do not get enough help in class and attend after school tutorials to get additional assistance. Some classes were considered “above their level” in inclusion content area classes because teachers generally “do not like to answer questions. Patricia said, “Ms. T cops an attitude and does not repeat what she said.”

One of the disadvantages most frequently identified regarding the resource setting was that participants disliked being teased by their peers when they were seen in resource classes. Several students mentioned that they did not want their friends to see them in resource classes. Other students made fun of them and called them names such as “retarded”, “slow”, and “sped” when they realized they were pulled out for support for a portion of the day.

Additionally, the student participants in this study felt that they knew more than students with more severe disabilities who were typically in resource classes all day. Anna commented, “At first, I didn’t like being in that class (resource). Those kids! My level is higher than them. They act like they are in kindergarten.” In contrast to herself, Anna felt strongly that one of the students in her class was “different and needed to be in another school” because he sat in class all day and colored. She explained, “Some of the other students need a lot of attention.” Ralph said, “I am not like them. They are slow and they act all retarded.” Patricia said, “They bang their heads on the walls. I can do more than them.” Patricia agreed with Ralph and said, “Me either. I do not want people calling me slow.” Most students agreed that they did not want other
students to see them in a small class. Bruce, Carl, and Arnold added, “Small classes are the best but it was embarrassing to be seen in them because your friends tease you.” Carl points out that he did not tease students in the small classes (resource) because he used to be in those classes and he knew how it feels to be teased. Patricia said they call each other names in both small and large classes.

None of the SWD in this study liked when teachers embarrassed them in front of their peers. Being singled out by the teacher was a factor that most study participants believed contributed to a negative environment. Some participants recalled incidents of being put out of class or not being allowed in class for being late. Carl identified teachers during his interview that kicked him out of class and another teacher told him to “shut up.” Carl expressed his dislike for two teachers:

Ms. T is real strict. It’s real easy to get kicked out of her class. Her number one rule is ‘Don’t come in and start asking questions’. If you have a question, she tells you to write it down. You can’t ask her anything when you have a question. You can’t ask questions while she’s teaching but after that you can only ask questions at the end of the class. Mr. M is another teacher who triggers my temper. I don’t like the way he talks to me and he shows favoritism. He says ‘shut up’. He’ll put you out and say ‘shut up’. That’s the only thing—he shows favoritism and kicks you out. He don’t kick the kids in his homeroom out. I don’t like that.

Patricia responded, “I do not like the art teacher because she keeps yelling at us and telling us the same thing. I just don’t know why she got to talk to us like that.” Several students reported that the art teacher “yelled and screamed each day” at students. Also, student
participants did not like for teachers to show favoritism in inclusion classes toward general education students, as Carl vividly described. One teacher, Ms. T, was described as “extremely strict” who did not like for students to ask questions until the lesson was over. Otherwise, they were put out of the class. Bruce said he felt uncomfortable with this practice and ultimately asked few questions because he said, “I stopped listening a long time ago.”

**Sub-Theme 1: Instructional elements.** The analysis of data from all sources revealed two sub-themes that provided support for the major theme of Classroom Climate: (a) Instructional Elements, and (b) Embarrassment—Negative Perceptions of Other Students with Disabilities. Additional instructional elements under Classroom Climate include several contributors: (a) instructional practices, (b) instructional location factors of inclusion vs. resource settings, and (c) instructional rigor involving the level of difficulty of classes for SWD. Those instructional factors developed from student statements related to the teaching methods that teachers used in both settings. Students identified teacher practices that they felt helped and hindered their learning like the level of their assignments and teacher responsiveness. Additionally, student named occurrences related to overall structure in both settings and how those things impacted their learning.

**Sub-Theme 2: Embarrassment—Negative perceptions of other students with disabilities.** Several students were embarrassed to ask for help while in inclusion classes because other students thought “they were not smart.” Other students made fun of them and called them names such as “retarded”, “slow”, and “sped”. Study participants were teased by their peers for leaving the general education classroom for a portion of the day. They did not like being teased and wanted to fit in with their non-disable peers. They were associated with students with more significant disabilities because they left the general education class. However, student
participants also viewed themselves differently from their peers with more significant disabilities. They felt that because they were able to participate in the inclusive setting that they were not like their peers who were self-contained in the resource setting all day.

**Theme 3: Perceived teacher efficacy.** Teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy when working with SWD (e.g., in-service and preservice) in inclusion classes are often mixed regarding their experiences. Several teachers reported being inadequately prepared to address the needs of SWD, especially in the areas of academics and behavior (Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). Other studies reported that general education teachers do not feel that they have received adequate training in professional development to handle the discipline problems that frequently occur in inclusion classes unless the special education teacher is present (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Carter et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2012; Heinrich et al., 2016).

Students with disabilities in this study appeared to recognize when teachers lacked the skills to support them instructionally and appeared to be uncomfortable in inclusion classes, which substantiates concerns expressed by teachers in previous studies. Participants recalled many situations when they felt that teachers allowed student behavior to impede learning in the inclusive classroom. Additionally, students discussed incidents when they felt teachers were not teaching them at all. Factors like disorganization and noise were cited repeatedly as hindrances to student participants’ ability to focus and learn within the inclusive settings. SWD were also disturbed by behaviors teachers exhibited that they felt were ineffective or that demonstrated an uncaring attitude. Substitute teachers were viewed by most participants as unimportant and were treated disrespectfully by several students during observations. Study participants expressed a desire to learn and clearly articulated their ideas of the traits exhibited by “good” teachers in comparison to “bad” ones.
On days when the substitute teacher was present in both inclusion and resource classes, there were several discipline problems and disruptions from SWD and without who were observed by the moderator. Students seemed to have feel no obligation to follow the directions of the substitute or to remain attentive during instruction. Three SWD were disruptive on separate observations and days when the teacher was absent. SWD commented to their peers that the work would not be graded or counted and did not take it seriously. In both instances, the substitute teacher informed the students that the work would be graded upon the teacher’s return to work.

Student data in this study revealed that students connected specific teacher actions and in some cases, lack of action to their overall efficacy. Students made specific judgments about their teachers based on their relationships with them, and the behaviors they exhibited in class. Patricia, Carl, Anna, Bruce, and Ralph expressed similar concerns about one of the teachers in the inclusion classroom. They felt that teacher did not seem to “know what she was doing.” Patricia said, “One teaches and the other one reads aloud and misses a lot of words and she does not explain things clearly.” Anna noted that no one understands what she is saying and she gets “angry if students question her or tell her they don’t understand what she is saying”.

Several SWD (i.e., Anna, Bruce, Carl, Grady, Patricia, Ralph, and Zachary) recognized a perceived lack of teacher efficacy in one of their inclusion teachers. They expressed that they wanted to replace a specific teacher, Ms. T, because she sits all day and does little, has difficulty reading aloud and stutters, gets an attitude when students ask her for help, and needs to provide more explanation. Another teacher was described as only giving “book and board work” and goes too fast while they were taking notes. Special education services must be appropriate to allow SWD access to instructional experiences that benefit them at their ability level. Student
descriptions of the teacher only giving one type of work and not providing clear explanations during instruction indicate that they were not receiving the specially designed instruction special education services are designed to provide.

Patricia seemed to understand and recognize the lack of teacher efficacy in one of her teachers, Ms. T. Patricia said, “If you tell Ms. T you don’t understand what she says, she gets mad. Then she said, ‘Don’t be rude to me’. I told her I was just trying to understand. She helps other people in the room, but everybody says they don’t understand what she is doing. Other teachers were mentioned during the discussion. Bruce added, “Mr. C needs to give us more time to learn the material before a test. Half the time I don’t know what he’s talking about.” Carl added, “And his teaching does not match his test.”

During the observations, most participants were observed in two settings: inclusion setting and resource setting. Although the majority of observations were with participants’ assigned teachers, in some instances, a substitute teacher taught the class. In those cases, participants were uncooperative, talkative, disruptive, and disrespectful to the substitute teacher. Students were observed standing up at their seats, texting, making disparaging remarks about teachers to other students, making dismissive comments to teachers, ignoring teachers, and rejecting assistance from teachers who offered to help them. Behaviors displayed with the substitute teachers were not present when students were observed with their assigned teacher.

Patricia was observed in a resource class with a substitute teacher. Her behavior was drastically different from the behavior she exhibited in an inclusive class with her assigned teachers. Patricia and another student were disruptive as they entered the classroom. Patricia continued to talk loudly as the substitute teacher attempted to redirect her. When a special education teacher on the staff entered the room to speak to the substitute teacher, she
immediately told Patricia to stop talking. The teacher told Patricia of her expectation that she follow the directions of the substitute teacher. Patricia apologized and began working. Patricia’s response highlights the perception of students that substitute teachers are not “real teachers” and that they do not have the ability to make them comply with any instructional or behavioral requests.

In another resource class with a substitute teacher, the researcher observed Ralph, who completed three problems and then began talking to another student. The substitute attempted to redirect Ralph back to his work several times but he completely ignored her. The teacher asked Ralph if he needed help. His neighbor commented that this work would not count and the teacher countered with it would count upon the teacher’s return. Ralph dismissed the teacher with, “I’m good. I don’t need your help anymore.” Again, Ralph completely ignored her directions and continued to talk to the other student.

Another factor that shaped student opinions of teacher efficacy was the behavior within the classroom. All students reported that they did not like being in general education classes with “loud students who created chaos and students who were bad.” They described general education students as “talking loud, getting out of seats, disobeying teachers, talking back with disrespectful behavior, using profanity, and not doing their work.” SWD felt that this type of behavior affected them by distracting them and impacting their concentration. An example was when Adam commented, “I don’t like being in class with bad kids and I wish they would all get sent home.”

Students with disabilities in this study agreed that general education students were not only disruptive but they often ignored teachers whom participants viewed as ineffective. An example of this behavior was shared by Arnold who described an inclusion class where students
were talking and not participating. Arnold asked them to stop talking and playing and they waved him off. This behavior frustrated Arnold and he did not like that the teacher did not address the other students’ behavior.

Overall, the behavior of SWD was observed to be better in resource classes than in inclusion classrooms when the instructor was their assigned special education teacher. In resource classes, students were engaged and more attentive. Also, in the resource setting students sought assistance from special education teacher more often. Some students sought assistance from a neighboring peer. Students described structured classroom routines in the resource setting and said that teachers addressed inappropriate student behaviors immediately. The observations conducted in resource classes while the assigned teacher was present supported study participants’ observations. The classes were observed to be more orderly than inclusion classes with less overall student disruptions.

The last major factor students reported related to their ideas of teacher efficacy was based on their perception of their teachers’ behaviors while co-teaching. In the current study, co-teaching teams used a variety of co-teaching methods in inclusion settings with in the inclusion setting. There were five co-teaching models used by teachers in this study during the observations. Yet, it was evident that most students were unfamiliar with the models. For example, several students made it clear that they did not understand why one teacher sat and observed and did nothing to help any students. The co-teaching model they described was the one teach-one observe model but students did not recognize it. The observing teacher’s role in that model is to collect data regarding students’ behavior and academic performance. Carl commented, “I hope that stool breaks”, and “She should be going around helping students but she just sits there.” The student associated the teacher’s behaviors with inadequacy.
Some SWD in inclusion classes were placed in the small group with the special education teacher while other students were assigned to the large group to receive instruction with the general education teacher. This is the alternative co-teaching model, which can be effective, especially when students understand its purpose. Jeanne even suggested its use during her interview because she has experienced success with that grouping in the past. During observations, Jeanne’s behavior supported her statements when the teacher allowed students to self-select which group they wanted to join during a transition to the alternative teaching model.

On the other hand, during other observations when alternative teaching was used, students ignored the special education teacher, did not make eye contact, did not follow directions, did not take notes, did not respond to special education teacher, and did not pay attention to the special education teacher. In those cases, students seemed embarrassed to be working with the special education teacher in a small group within the inclusion class.

The analysis data collected ultimately uncovered two sub-themes, Behavior Management and Understanding of Co-teaching Models, supporting the major theme Perceived Teacher Efficacy.

**Sub-Theme 1: Behavior management.** This sub-theme includes the student identification of factors including disrespect towards substitute teachers, disruptive peers, classroom distractions—noise, and non-engagement in class. Carl, Arnold, Anna, and Jeanne reported that they were bothered by behaviors they viewed as disruptive in their inclusion classes. Furthermore, SWD described general education students as talking loud, getting out of seats, disobeying teachers, talking back with disrespectful behavior, using profanity, and not doing their work. This type of behavior affected students’ with disabilities attention by distracting them and impacting their concentration.
Students’ with disabilities behavior was observed to be better in resource classes than in inclusion classrooms. In resource classes, students were engaged and more attentive. The resource classes had defined structure and routines. The classes were observed to be more orderly with less overall student disruptions than the inclusion classes.

**Sub-Theme 2: Understanding of co-teaching models.** The different co-teaching models general education and special education teachers used during observations were: (a) alternative teaching, (b) parallel teaching with equal size groups, (c) station teaching, (d) team teaching, and (e) one teaches-one observes. Many student comments were related to teacher instruction and student grouping. In several cases, student participants described co-teaching models in use but did not have a clear understanding of the purpose of the model. Furthermore, study participants did not have a full understanding of the rationale for having two teachers in the classroom and the roles they each served. This overall lack of understanding of classroom structure impacted the students’ perception of the teachers and the learning opportunities within the inclusion classroom.

**Research Question Responses**

*How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings?*

The themes Teacher-student Relationships and Classroom Climate supply evidence regarding student perceptions of their educational settings. Ninth grade SWD made vast and detailed observations regarding their educational settings. Some students were extremely impacted by the behavior of their peers and teachers. Adam and Arnold discussed how they had matured since entering high school and how their behavior had improved. They wanted to see
similar changes in their peers and tried to influence them positively. Both students were upset at times because they felt that the behaviors of others kept them from learning.

Additionally, most student participants described their thoughts regarding classroom incidents related to teachers’ intervention or lack of intervention regarding student behavior. Participants were also keenly aware of their personal interactions with their teachers, as well as how they interacted with their peers. Most participants were very troubled by interactions they believed were disrespectful between students and teachers. Overall, student participants were able to establish mutually respectful working relationships with teachers they believed cared about them and who were vested in their progress. Conversely, students gave little effort towards developing relationships with teachers they viewed as incompetent or temporary.

*How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive similarities and differences in an inclusive classroom setting and a resource setting?*

The theme Classroom Climate contributes to verifications of students’ perception of the impactful similarities and differences between inclusive and resource settings. Participant descriptions of similarities and differences in inclusion and resource settings identified positive and negative aspects in both instructional settings. Students clearly preferred the structure and safety they found in the resource setting but they desired that atmosphere in an inclusion setting. Participants were aware that teachers in the resource setting had more time to work with them individually, repeat instructions, and reteach concepts. Also, students stated that they could ask questions at any time and seemed confident that their resource teachers would help them.

Furthermore, students were cognizant of the variations in student behavior between the settings, as well as teacher responses to it. On the other hand, students concluded that they were less likely to ask for and receive extra help in the inclusion setting. Bruce was empathetic to his
one of his inclusion teacher’s struggle to support all students. He pointed out that he knew she
could not always help him because she had so many students. Several students stated that if they
needed more help from their inclusion teachers, they just went to afterschool tutorial, which
clearly supports their perception that they did not get the support they needed in the inclusion
setting. Furthermore, students used words like loud and chaos to describe their inclusion classes,
while these descriptors were never used to describe the resource classes when the assigned
teacher was present.

What factors, if any, impact ninth grade students’ with disabilities experiences in an
inclusion setting and a resource setting?

The themes Teacher-student Relationships, Classroom Climate, and Perceived Teacher
Efficacy each supply documentation of the factors students associated with their experiences in
their instructional settings. When student participants shared their views of their experiences and
were observed in inclusion and resource classes, several factors emerged. The overall behavior
of climate of the classroom and their perception of the teachers’ efficacy impacted them greatly.
Students shared experiences that kept them from learning as much as they felt they could. For
example, participants did not like when other students were talking during instruction and
playing while working in groups. However, while participants recognized that their peers in
inclusion often reduced their opportunities to learn, they wanted to remain in that setting so that
they would not be teased or viewed as special.

Additionally, participants recognized teacher traits that impacted their learning and they
were able to give specific details about those behaviors. For example, Bruce did not like one of
his inclusion classes because the teacher would not allow questions until the end. He clearly
recognized that waiting until the end of the lesson to ask question often left him very confused.
Bruce said, “Why would I bother asking a question at the end? I stopped listening a long time ago.” Furthermore, students viewed teachers who were sitting down during instruction or who did not address problem behaviors quickly and effectively as a barrier to their ability to learn as well. Student participants also identified factors that occurred in both settings that they felt improved their opportunities to learn like the teacher repeating instructional concepts and slowing down. For example, Jeanne appreciated the opportunity to work in a small group within the inclusion class because her teacher was able to slow the instruction down. In the end, students overwhelmingly felt there was more classroom structure and better behavior management in the resource setting. Another example was when Adam and Jeanne stated that the resource class was quieter and had few distractions while they worked. Students also said that they felt that the smaller number of students gave the teachers more time to help them overall. For those reasons, student participants believed they were able to learn more in their resource classes than in their inclusion classes.

Summary

Chapter four presented the findings based on the three qualitative sub-questions: (a) How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings? (b) How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive similarities and differences in an inclusive classroom setting and a resource setting? and (c) What factors, if any, impact ninth grade students’ with disabilities experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting? Student participants provided a variety of examples and details to support factors within each classroom setting that impacted their ability to learn from their perspective positively and negatively. The analysis of data resulted in identification of three major themes. They were: (a) Teacher-student (b) Classroom Climate, and (c) Perceived Teacher Efficacy. Chapter five presents the overview,
summary of findings, discussion, implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for further research based on the findings in this study.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of nine ninth grade SWD who receive special education services in an inclusion and resource setting. The review of literature reveals a gap in research associated with the perceptions of students’ with disabilities about their instructional settings. Chapter 1 explains the purpose of the study and the contribution it makes to research in the area of student perceptions. Chapter 2 is an in-depth examination of literature related to the study. Chapter 3 provides a description of the research methods implored during the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study findings, a discussion of those findings, and recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

The data collected from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and observations were carefully analyzed. The coding of data revealed three major themes: (a) Teacher-student Relationships, (b) Classroom Climate, and (c) Perceived Teacher Efficacy. Sub-themes are discussed under those major themes.

Theme One: Teacher-student Relationships

Theme one emerged from student experiences based on participants’ perceived lack of instructional support and their views on teacher behaviors. Interpersonal relationships were demonstrated in previous studies to be an influencing factor related to a student’s ability to learn and develop in a classroom environment (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009). Though students in this study were empathetic to the fact that inclusion teachers had many students to support, they held high expectations for their personal student-teacher interactions and instruction as a whole.
Participants identified specific teacher behaviors and environmental barriers within the inclusive classroom setting that they believed “slowed down” their learning. The noted behaviors and barriers identified played a significant role in the type of relationship the students had with teachers.

Student perceptions regarding help with their work were shaped by many factors. Comprehensively, SWD felt that they did not get enough help with their work, especially in the inclusion classroom. Moreover, student participants repeatedly mentioned that in the resource setting, teachers were able to help them more because they had fewer students. Furthermore, students recognized teachers increased ability to reteach, repeat instructions, and break complex concepts down when they were in the resource setting. Students with disabilities in the current study enjoyed the increased social opportunities of the inclusion classroom but they voiced a preference for the increased teacher support received in the resource setting.

Previous research was confirmed by the findings in the current study. When questioned on their preferences, students in other research studies indicated an inclination for general education settings due to enhanced social opportunities to make friends compared to resource classrooms with fewer students and fewer opportunities to socialize with friends (Anderman et al., 2011; McHatton et al., 2014; Obiakor et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011; Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009).

Ralph and Gregory indicated some preference for general education settings due to enhanced social opportunities compared to resource classrooms. However differing from previous research findings in the current study revealed students’ preference for individualized attention and help with school work was for resource settings. Student responses and reflections
related to their educational settings preferences provided a more comprehensive view of programmatic strengths and weaknesses (Miller, Garriott, & Mershon, 2005).

In addition to recognizing perceived learning barriers between the instructional settings, student participants’ defined opinions and expectations associated with teachers’ interaction with them. Students developed positive and functional relationships with teachers they perceived as caring and invested in their progress (Eckhart et al., 2011; Haeberlin et al., 2012). A student, like Jeanne in the current study, appreciated gestures like “sitting next to my teacher to stay on focus,” “checking on me to see if I got the answer correct”, and “being invited to participate in activities outside of school by a teacher.” Students, like Carl, did not develop positive relationships with teachers that he felt were “only there for a check” and did not care about them. Additionally, students were able to give classroom related examples of teacher behaviors that they appreciated and more importantly felt improved their learning potential. Participants from the same schools pinpointed exact behaviors like “breaking it down” and “yells all the time” that they considered positively and negatively impactful to their learning, as demonstrated by different teachers.

**Theme Two: Classroom Climate**

Theme two emanated from students’ detailed accounts of how a class should and should not function. Descriptors like “fun” and “hands-on” were associated with positive classroom experiences, while “boring” and “overwhelming” were used to portray negative ones. Study participants gave details to distinguish instructional elements they perceived as beneficial like working in a small group with students who were “focused.” In addition to specifying impactful instructional elements, students expressed social differences between classroom settings they found important. Study participants felt they had more opportunities to make friends in their
inclusion classes simply because there were more students. The finding in the current study indicated that study participants thought they made more friends in inclusion classes because there were more students and because those classes contained more social structure to make friends. Students with disabilities developed a better social network of friends in inclusion classes and interacted more socially with peers and their teachers. Also, students felt that the likelihood of being teased was increased when they were in the “regular” class rather than the “small” class.

The findings in the current study were confirmed in prior research which indicated SWD thought they had the opportunity to develop a better social network of friends in inclusion classes. Eckhart et al. (2011) found that SWD developed positive social relationships with their peers and interacted more socially with peers and their teachers in inclusion classes. Therefore, the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms may have a positive impact on their future personal, social, and professional success (Eckhart et al., 2011).

In general, study participants understood the importance of school and wanted to learn. They appreciated engaging instructional practices like games and experiments. However, students frequently identified instructional practices they perceived as mundane and unproductive, like copying from the book or completing a worksheet packet. Students preferred activities that allowed them to select their groups, allowed them to be competitive, and were interactive but they felt those opportunities were limited in both classroom settings. The instructional practices of the teachers were important to the classroom climate for SWD, and they associated them with the teachers they preferred.

On the other hand, SWD regarded the social aspects of the resource setting with disdain. Many of the study participants expressed negative views of their peers with disabilities who
remained in the special education setting the entire day. Students who received support in the resource setting and inclusion setting considered themselves to be “different” and often “smarter” than the students with more significant disabilities. They did not like the connection that was made to them with students with more significant disabilities when they were pulled out into a resource setting for a portion of the day. Even though study participants did not like how some SWD were treated by their general education peers, they also considered themselves to be “better” than their significantly disabled counterparts. These feelings fueled their desire to receive instruction in the general education setting despite their clear understanding that they received more help in the resource setting.

**Theme Three: Perceived Teacher Efficacy**

Theme three was discovered from student participants’ characterizations of their teachers’ ability to provide quality instruction, manage behavior in the classroom, and the impact misbehavior had on the learning environment. The student narratives revealed concerns about some teachers’ ability to teach overall (Akalina & Sucuoglu, 2015; Allday et al., 2013; Cameron & Cook, 2013; Yang & Rusli, 2012). Students were concerned about the performance of those teachers. Study participants expressed dislike for teachers they felt sat down all day and did not move around the class providing individual support. Furthermore, students shared their annoyance related to the unaddressed misbehavior of students who were not focused during instruction. Also, students held misconceptions related to some teacher practices because they did not understand them. None of the study participants fully understood the co-teaching models or the purpose of having two teachers in the inclusion classroom setting. Therefore, at times they misunderstood the teachers’ behaviors because they did not recognize the co-teaching model in use.
Participants considered teachers who adjusted their instruction based on students’ requests for repetition or a change in instructional pace to be more effective than those who made no adjustments at all. In fact, students voiced resentment towards teachers whom they observed going quickly through the lesson, who did not allow questions to be asked or required activities they viewed as useless. Students recognized their own preferences for instruction in both settings but only one student, Jeanne, felt confident enough to make a suggestion to the teacher regarding a preference.

**Research Questions**

The central research question for this study was: How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings?

*How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive their experiences in educational settings?*

The formulation of the perceptions of SWD were heavily impacted by their relationships with their teachers and the climate within their classrooms. Students associated quiet and structured classrooms with increased learning opportunities. They also associated smaller numbers of students in the class with an increased opportunity to receive personal help from the teacher. Study participants demonstrated a strong interest in learning and they desired direct teacher support. Furthermore, they appreciated teacher behaviors that made them feel comfortable asking for assistance and expressing their needs for repetition or a reduced instructional pace.

*How do ninth grade students with disabilities perceive similarities and differences in an inclusive classroom setting and a resource setting?*

Instructional practices and factors that impacted learning influenced the development of students’ with disabilities perceptions about the similarities and differences between inclusion
and resource classes. Students pinpointed positive and negative experiences within both settings. However, the vast majority of study participants recognized that the inclusion setting has limitations related to the level of instructional support teachers could provide due to the increased number of students in those classes. Students with disabilities enjoyed receiving instruction in the inclusion setting for social reasons; however, they did not feel the intended impact of having two teachers in one classroom. Participants wanted more instructional support in the inclusion classes, which they considered to be a more socially appropriate setting.

*What factors, if any, impact ninth grade students’ with disabilities experiences in an inclusion setting and a resource setting?*

There were numerous factors that students named in both classroom environments that helped or hindered their ability to learn. Students with disabilities desired engaging instructional activities with peers they felt wanted to learn or in some cases knew more than they did. They enjoyed classes with teachers perceived as caring and competent. Overall, students desired a quiet and structured learning environment and resented people or actions they found to be contrary to that type of setting. Students respected teachers and peers whom they felt respected them and the learning environment as a whole. They did not appreciate being mistreated in anyway or seeing others mistreated, or favoritism shown towards regular students. These preferences caused many students to feel a sense of safety in a smaller environment despite the increased social opportunities in a larger classroom settings.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand and describe the perceptions of nine ninth grade SWD who received special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting. Overall, the study revealed a rich portrait of the inclusion and
resource classroom central settings from the perspective of SWD. Ultimately, the findings for the current study regarding how ninth grade students perceive their experiences in their educational settings are valuable to all stakeholders. This research shows that appropriate implementation practices are necessary for the effective inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms.

**Theoretical Findings**

The work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978, and 1987) was selected as the theoretical framework for this phenomenological study because his constructivist theory greatly influences special education practices. Vygotsky (1962) was a notable Russian psychologist in the early 1930s whose theory is linked to the social nature of learning. Vygotsky’s (1987) theory of social learning is demonstrated in both the inclusion and resource settings depending on the instructional practices of the teacher. However, the inclusion environment more closely aligns with the ideals Vygotsky held regarding students reaching their optimal potential in a social learning environment.

Vygotsky (1987) purports that development cannot be separated from its social context of teaching and learning. For teaching and learning to occur in any setting, there must be: (a) active learners, (b) active teachers, and (c) active social environments. All three elements must come together in the classroom, allowing students to relate to or, at least, become aware of their own and their peers’ thinking. This study provides further support for Vygotsky’s theory because all three elements were not always present and students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their classroom settings and their teachers were impacted by their absence.

Students’ voices from both high schools were similar in the interviews, focus groups, and observations. Similar to the findings in Quenemoen’s (2009) study, the current study found that
if teachers varied the different co-teaching models while teaching, students would get enough help when needed. The results of this study found that students overwhelmingly reported limited use of the six co-teaching models, with two of the six being used the vast majority of the time (Friend, 2016). Underutilizing co-teaching models and stagnant student grouping resulted in students experiencing lessened benefit from working and learning collaboratively with their peers. This finding in the current study was confirmed in a study by Friend (2016) at the high school level regarding the challenge of lack of interdisciplinary planning between teachers in the inclusion classroom that interferes with working across a wide variety of content teams and causes a sense of disconnectedness of student learning.

Students with disabilities in the current study recognized those missed learning opportunities and were upset by these practices. Additionally, Quenemoen’s (2009) research found that while SWD require a diverse array of services to help them fully access the general education curriculum, most of them could achieve the same academic outcomes as their peers without disabilities, if all teachers fulfilled their teaching responsibilities. Findings in this study support Quenemoen’s research based on students’ overall perceptions that they were not getting enough help and therefore were not learning as much as they thought they could in their inclusion classes.

The findings of this study further support Vygotsky’s constructivist theory of the optimal learning environment for all students (1962, 1978, and 1987). He theorized that students are able to learn how to function in society by learning in appropriate social contexts. Participants in this study were quite aware of the positive and negative influences their peers had on their learning outcomes. Students with disabilities from both high schools reported that although there were two teachers in the larger classes (i.e., inclusion setting) and it appeared that
they would receive help in general, that was not always the case. Also, SWD reported that there was often “too much chaos” and “too many discipline problems” from students who did not want to learn in their inclusion classes. As a result, they stated that learning in the classroom was “slowed down” for them because the optimal learning environment of Vygotsky’s theory was structurally flawed.

**Empirical Findings**

This study serves as an opportunity for SWD to voice their opinions about their learning environments. Previous research substantiates the importance of student and teacher perceptions on student outcomes (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Lamport et al., 2012; MacSuga-Gage & Simonsen, 2014). Also, the inclusion of SWD in resource classrooms may have a positive impact on their future personal, social, and professional success (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Lamport, Graves, & Ward, 2012).

Students’ social growth is not only important but it impacts their academic achievement as well (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Lamport et al., 2012; Reinke et al., 2008; Simonsen et al., 2014). The research of MacSuga-Gage and Simonsen (2014) confirms the findings in this study that students want a voice regarding their learning environments and if given opportunities to learn, SWD have positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Participant experiences in this study portrayed instructional environments and teachers that are in need of further development. The findings of this study aligned with the findings of previous research on student perceptions (De Boer et al., 2010; Ruijs et al., 2010; Ryan, 2010; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011) and teacher perceptions (Angelides et al., 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gavish & Shimoni, 2013), as well as justified the need for additional research to gain further insight on students’ perceptions of their needs in instructional settings.
The results of this study confirmed the finding that high school students want caring and helping teachers and not teachers who embarrass them (Cushman & Rodgers, 2008; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). In a previous study that was conducted in a Canadian middle school, Lapointe et al. (2005) found that students’ attitudes toward learning and performance in mathematics classrooms were influenced by their perceptions of teachers (Allday et al., 2013; Rix et al., 2011; Sosu et al., 2010; Spence, 2010; Weber, 2012). Carl made negative comments about teachers that they did not like such as, “I wish that stool would break.” Ralph commented about the teacher, “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” Such comments were mirrored by general education and gifted education students in Lapointe et al.’s investigation who experienced greater achievement and motivation in classes where teachers were viewed as helpful, caring, thoughtful, and friendly. Students with disabilities in the current study thought just the opposite of teachers they felt were not helpful, caring, thoughtful, or friendly.

**Implications**

The implications in the current study are important to school administrators, teachers, parents, and SWD who are served in inclusive and resource settings. Previous research indicated that all students can benefit from instructional strategies utilized by special education teachers. However, the voices of students provide valuable information regarding practices and strategies that make the learning environment optimal in their minds (McHatton et al., 2014). This section discusses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for all stakeholders.

**Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical framework for his study is based on Vygotsky’s constructivist theory. The evolution of practices related to LRE in education have their basis in the social nature of learning grown out of Vygotsky’s teachings. The expressions of student participants provided
validation for the constructivist theory because SWD repeatedly identified specific instances from their perspectives when they were able to increase their learning by working with their peers. Additionally, students clearly explained how working with students who know more than they did and who were focused impacted their learning potential positively.

**Empirical Implications**

A significant empirical implication relates to participants’ overall ability to voice their preferences about being taught in inclusion or resource settings. In fact, all of the participants expressed themselves quite well and seemed happy to share what they thought. This research shows that secondary SWD are able to voice their opinions regarding their instructional placement (McHatton et al., 2014). The majority of the student participants prefer to be in an inclusion setting when they are confident about the content area and are knowledgeable about their skill levels. Those preferred classes were usually subjects the students felt they were “good” in and were taught by teachers they liked. In contrast, students shared a preference for instruction in a resource setting for subjects that they considered their academic skills to be below average and they received more individual attention from the teacher. This information from student participants is invaluable for school administrators, teachers and parents because their perception is their reality. More importantly, this reality impacts their performance in class based on data collected in this study. Just as previous research has indicated, students’ and teachers’ attitudes impact student outcomes. This study reveals the connection between students’ feelings about how the environment itself contributes to or interferes with their ability to learn.
Practical Implications

An important practical implication of this research for school administrators and teachers is the need for co-teaching teams to teach all students in inclusion classes the six co-teaching models (Friend & Cook, 1996; Friend & Cook, 2017). Teaching students to recognize the models utilized in their classes helps students become invested stakeholders in their learning. Intentionally including students in the instructional processes helps the student gain a better understanding of everyone’s role in the classroom and creates the opportunity for them to provide teachers’ input regarding the models they feel help them most. All students, including SWD, can be taught to recognize the most common approaches to co-teaching that provide ways for general education and special education teachers to work together in a classroom efficiently (Friend & Cook, 1996; Friend & Cook, 2017).

Another practical implication from this study that is useful for administrators and teachers is the indication that co-teaching models should be used more effectively. Previous research indicates that all the co-teaching models serve specific purposes but that some are more effective than others (Friend, 2016; Friend et al., 2010; Friend & Cook, 2017). For example, station teaching and alternative teaching, both of which reduce the student-teacher ratio, could be used more frequently than other co-teaching models so students receive appropriate assistance when needed on difficult concepts (Friend & Bursuck, 2009). There is significant research on the implementation of co-teaching and its benefits for all students. However for appropriate implementation, quality professional development and coaching are required (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Duchaine et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2013).

In light of the need for professional development, training, and coaching for effective implementation of co-teaching models, administrators and teachers can use the findings in the
current study to enhance professional development activities (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Hernandez, 2013). Students’ voices in the current study provide evidence of how teacher practices and behaviors impact them. For example, one teacher did not want questions asked until the end of the lesson and would not interact with the students with inquiries. Another teacher became upset when students asked her questions and “copped an attitude”, according to several students (Everett, 2015). Those student observations coincide with the outcomes of Everett’s research regarding teachers’ attitudes and interactions with SWD. Professional development that equips teachers with the knowledge of how the instructional environment is viewed by SWD can change the atmosphere of placement discussions and the implementation of special education services in both settings (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2016; Harbour & Maulik, 2010; Jones & Hensley, 2012).

The final practical implication that rose from the findings in this study for administrators and teachers was the importance of including SWD in their IEP meetings (Lamport et al., 2012). SWD in secondary school (grades 9-12) should be part of the Individual Education Plan meetings when it comes to deciding the best instructional setting for them to reach their optimal potential. Several of the student participants were embarrassed to be seen sitting in the small classes because other students in general education classes teased them about being in special education and called them names (Vessey & O’Neill, 2011). Including students in their meetings can help them to better understand the rationale behind the service models to reduce feelings of stigma and embarrassment. Additionally, including students in their meetings empowers them with the detailed knowledge of why specific decisions are usually made and steps necessary to move between the two instructional environments.
Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations refer to the scope of the study (Simon & Goes, 2013). This study was limited to the investigation of ninth grade students’ with disabilities perceptions of their placement in inclusion settings and resource settings in two rural high schools in Georgia. The results of this study do not apply to other SWD across grade levels and the nation. Furthermore, the study results cannot be generalized to all ninth grade SWD. Another delimitation of this study was the exclusion of elementary schools and middle schools. High school students were selected as participants because their age increased the probability that they would be able to share experiences from both instructional settings. Another delimitation of the study was the inclusion of only students with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability. Exclusively using students identified in one disability area may have produced different qualitative data than it would have if students from all areas of exceptionality were included. However, SLD students were selected for this study because it was assumed that they have ability to be able to express their thoughts and feelings about their instructional environments.

Limitations are weaknesses or drawbacks of the study that researchers identify and disclose to participants of the study (Horga, Kaur, & Peterson, 2014). A limitation for this study was the selection of only two high schools located in a rural school community. The demographics of the community produced a participant population that included students who were all African Americans, which may have influenced the study findings. Additionally, only parents and students who volunteered were participants in this study. Therefore, the population of participants included more males than females.
Recommendations for Further Research

This research increases the body of knowledge on the perceptions of SWD on inclusive settings and resource settings. Many research articles are in the review of literature that focus on the success of SWD in inclusive settings, perceptions of stakeholders, collaborative co-teaching approaches and the relationship between co-teachers in the inclusive setting.

Recommendations for further research include expanding the study to other public schools on the elementary and middle school levels to determine if similar results are found.

There is inconsistent research on the effectiveness of co-teaching, but research shows when clear expectations and meaningful use of the skills of both teachers are not evident, co-teaching can be ineffective in the eyes of the teachers involved (Lamport et al., 2012; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011). The results of this study indicate that the perception of ineffectiveness is shared by SWD in those classes (Allday et al., 2013; Rix et al., 2011; Sosu et al., 2010; Spence, 2010). Therefore, further research could focus on how to increase the effectiveness of the co-teaching approaches in inclusive settings along with incorporating input from students to guide program development. Making these changes in the implementation of inclusion has the probability to increase teacher and student satisfaction, as well as improve student learning outcomes.

Teachers and administrators could use these findings to further develop effective co-teaching teams that are capable of implementing effective practices and facilitating a structured learning environment. Procedures and practices could be created to promote student participation in their learning and IEP planning. Professional development opportunities could be provided to enhance all teachers’ use of varied teaching techniques and to extend content knowledge (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Hernandez, 2013). Finally, special
education teachers could share their specialized practices utilized in the resource setting with general education teachers to facilitate and support learning for SWD in inclusive settings.

Other recommendations for further research include:

1. Replicating the study using SWD of different disabilities and ages.
2. Replicating the study using only female participants or comparing the responses of females and males regarding educational placement.
3. Replicating the study with the addition of interviews and focus groups with the co-teachers to compare their responses to their students.
4. Research on teacher efficacy based on teacher training and preparation for inclusion are warranted for both general education teachers and special education teachers.
5. Research is needed to identify specifically how the attitudes of teachers towards SWD may impact their placement recommendations.
6. Additional research is required to demonstrate how programs and practices related to the provision of special education services in both setting promote or hinder social interaction among SWD and their peers.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of ten ninth grade SWD who receive special education services in either an inclusion or resource setting. The themes and sub-themes for research question 1 were: Teacher-student relationships, with two sub-themes—Help with School Work and Impactful Teacher Traits. The themes and sub-themes for research question 2 were: Classroom Climate, with two sub-themes—Instructional Elements and Embarrassment—Negative Perception of Other
Students with Disabilities. The themes and sub-themes for research question 3 were: Perceived Teacher Efficacy, with two sub-themes—Behavior Management and Understanding of Co-teaching Models.

The majority of the SWD in this study agreed that although they are often teased and called names by general education students, they still preferred to be in the resource setting more than the inclusion setting due to the increase teacher support they received (Odom et al., 2011). The findings in the current study are important to school administrators, teachers, parents, and SWD who are placed in inclusive settings and resource settings without hearing their voices on the matter (McHatton et al., 2014). The majority of those students would prefer to be in an inclusion setting when they are confident about the content area and are knowledgeable about their skill levels. Otherwise, they would prefer to be in a resource setting when their skill levels are below average and they need one-on-one, individual attention from the special education teacher. However, it is important to recognize that the study findings indicated that students had a desire to interact with their nondisabled peers but they also wanted the instructional supports they received in the resource setting to be present in the inclusion setting.

These findings support a need for a reexamination of the implementation of the continuum of special education service placement options for high school SWD (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012). These findings coincide with other studies that support an ongoing debate regarding the appropriateness of resource classes for some SWD (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Currently, sparse qualitative studies exist that uplift the voices of SWD related to services provided to them in the inclusive and resource settings. For this reason, this research makes a significant contribution to the literature and provides a foundation for further research on the effective inclusion of SWD in the inclusive setting.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Parental and Child Assent Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Micole Atkins Talley. As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my study is “A Phenomenological Study of Ninth Grade Students’ with Disabilities Perceptions of Educational Settings.” The purpose of my research is to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions as they are served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting. I am writing to invite your child to participate in my study. Your child will be asked questions about his or her placement in an inclusive classroom and a resource classroom. Your child’s responses will be digitally recorded to be sure that we get what was said. The Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools will be in the room during the focus group discussion and will escort your child to and from the Media Center where the interview and focus group will occur.

Your child is enrolled in the ninth grade and has an IEP with an identified specific learning disability. In addition, your child must be under 18 years of age and enrolled in an inclusion program and resource environment. Your child must be willing to participate or you are willing to allow your child to participate in an individual interview and a student focus group. You will be asked to sign and return this informed consent and read your child’s assent letter and have him or her to sign it and return both forms to the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools within five days. It should take approximately 30 minutes for the individual interview and 45-60 minutes for the focus group. Your child’s participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required. Your child’s name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of his or her participation. However during the study, your child’s name will be changed to another name so no one will identify him or her.

For your child to participate, complete, sign, and return the consent document to your child’s Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools. Then contact me at [redacted] for further information. You and your child will receive a letter with the individual interviews schedule and the focus group schedule, if you granted permission for your child to participate in these two procedures of this study.

A parent consent document and a child assent letter will be sent home with your child who will give it to you for him or her to participate in an interview and a student focus group. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it within five days to the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools before the interview and focus group.

If you choose for your child to participate in this study, you nor your child will be given any financial compensation.
Sincerely,

Micole Atkins Talley  
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

___ Yes, my child, __________________, can participate in this study.

___ Yes, you may interview my child about his or her perceptions of an inclusive setting and a resource classroom placement. I understand that the interview will be recorded to get what is said.

___ Yes, my child may participate in a student focus group about his or her perceptions of an inclusive setting and a resource classroom placement. I understand that the interview will be recorded to get what is said.

___ No, my child may not participate in any way in this study.

______________________________  
Print your name

______________________________  
Signature of Parent  Date

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child’s responses as part of his or her participation in this study.

Signature: ____________________________  Date: ____________

Signature of Parent or Guardian: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Child: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator: ____________________________ Date: ____________
APPENDIX B

Request Permission to Conduct Study in School District

Dear Superintendent or Designee:

My name is Micole Atkins Talley. As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my study is “A Phenomenological Study of Ninth Grade Students’ with Disabilities Perceptions of Educational Settings.” The purpose of my research is to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in [Redacted]. I would like to utilize your high schools list to recruit participants for my research to invite them to participate in my research study to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting.

Participants will be asked to schedule an interview and participate in a student focus group. The data will be used to describe ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting. Parents and participants will be presented with informed consent information five days prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants will be welcomed to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval with the appropriate signature.

Sincerely,

Micole Atkins Talley
Doctoral Student, Liberty University
APPENDIX C

Request Permission to Conduct Study in Schools

Dear High School Principals:

My name is Micole Atkins Talley. As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my study is “A Phenomenological Study of Ninth Grade Students’ with Disabilities Perceptions of Educational Settings.” The purpose of my research is to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in Richmond County School District. I would like to utilize your high schools to recruit participants for my research to invite them to participate in this study to explore ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting.

Participants will be asked to schedule an interview and participate in a student focus group. The data will be used to describe ninth grade students with disabilities’ perceptions of being served in an inclusive setting and a resource setting. Parents and participants will be presented with informed consent information five days prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants will be welcomed to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval with the appropriate signature.

Sincerely,

Micole Atkins Talley
Doctoral Student, Liberty University
APPENDIX D

Student Focus Group Discussion Questions

Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer
APPENDIX E

Student Interview Questions

Directions (Say:) I am going to ask you some questions about your class and your teachers. There will be no right or wrong answers to these questions. This is not a test, and you will not be graded. Your teachers and classmates will not see your answers. I want to know what you really think.

Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/inclusion-or-pull-out-which-do-students-prefer
APPENDIX F

Permission to Use Student Interview Questions and Focus Group Discussion Questions


Title: Inclusion or Pull-Out
Author: Janette Kettmann Klingner, Sharon Vaughn, Jeanne Shay Schumm, et al
Publication: Journal of Learning Disabilities
Publisher: SAGE Publications
Date: 03/01/1998
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### APPENDIX G

**Field Notes Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusive Classroom Setting</th>
<th>Resource Classroom Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation # _____</td>
<td>Observation # _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Date:</td>
<td>Observation Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Time:</td>
<td>Beginning Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending Time:</td>
<td>Ending Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers:</td>
<td>Teachers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Location (classroom):</td>
<td>Observation Location (classroom):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students Present:</td>
<td>Number of Students Present:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Notes:</td>
<td>Observation Notes:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Student Focus Group Protocol

Opening: Setting the Stage for Discussion

My name is Ms. Micole Atkins Talley and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. Today, I will serve as facilitator of this focus group session that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Before you speak, you must say your name first. For example, “My name is Gregory” and then say what you want to say. A digital recorder is sitting in the middle of the table to make sure we get what you say. So be sure to speak loud enough so we can understand what you are saying.

After introductions, I want you to say your name and tell us what you want to be when you grow up. We will go around the room and you will practice saying your name before you say something. What is your favorite television show? Great job. Well, let me tell you what I wanted to be when I was your age.

Good! Let’s begin by telling you why you are here today. You are here because we want to know what you think about your classes and special education teachers. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to hear from you about inclusive classes and resource classes and your teachers. Do not tell anyone what we talked about today. No one will know what you said and your real name will not be used in this study.

Before you go back to your class, you can eat some of the refreshments on the back table because you may be hungry and thirsty since it is the last period of the day. Then the Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools will take you to the restroom and escort each of you safely back to your classes for dismissal.
**Set the Ground Rules**

Remember…before speaking, say your name and then speak loud and clear so we can get everything that you say. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. What you say is important to us and no one can judge what you say because everyone will respect your opinion. Wait your turn to speak and say your name each time before you speak. Over the next few minutes, I am going to ask the group a few questions. Please share your honest thoughts about each question. Do not tell anyone about this discussion or what anyone said.

**Conducting the Discussion**

You will be asked only one question at a time. I will use this flipchart to write down what each of you said. That way, we can look at what the entire group thinks about a question.

**Wrap Up (10 minutes)**

Now, you can get some refreshments and listen while I will read what everyone said about a question as the “wrap up” of the group discussion. I appreciate your participation for providing valuable input today. The Aspire Coach and special education teachers at the high schools will take you to the restrooms and then escort you to your classes. Again, thank you so much for being such good participants for my study.
APPENDIX I

School District’s Permission Letter

November 10, 2015

Dear Micole Talley:

I am pleased to inform you that your request for research titled “A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY SPECIAL NEEDS NINTH GRADE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS IN A GEORGIA SCHOOL DISTRICT” has been approved with certain stipulations outlined below. This authorization simply means that you are able to conduct your research as described in your application.

Stipulations of this approval include:

1. It is acceptable for you to send your parental survey home as long as:
2. It is sealed for the parent/guardian to receive; and
3. You provide a return envelope so that the survey can be sealed as the student returns it.
4. For purposes of this specific research, please make certain that you clearly identify yourself in your capacity as a researcher rather than as an agent of the RCSS.
5. Further, you will need to work closely with the building-level supervisors to ensure that:
   - Instructional time is not being negatively impacted; and,
   - School personnel are not being subjected to undo burdens as a result of this research being conducted.

Please note that the RCSS follows these general procedural guidelines:
Research that is approved by the Department of Student Services does not guarantee
that schools, departments, school personnel, parents, students, community leaders, others, etc. will participate.

1. Participation is strictly voluntary and should be neither expected nor anticipated. Each entity will need to agree to participate, and they have every right to decline to do so without consequence;
2. No research involving [redacted] students will be approved without the express written consent of Parent/Guardian. In other words, Parent/Guardian must “opt-in” in writing prior to being included in any outside research;
3. No research will be approved that interferes with instructional time;
4. The district will assume no responsibility for accepting, disseminating, collecting, warehousing, and/or forwarding of any materials for researcher;
5. All costs associated with approved research are the sole responsibility of the researcher;
6. No [redacted] equipment or resources are to be used to facilitate your research. These include (but are not limited to):
   a. Email;
   b. Fax Machines;
   c. Copiers;
   d. Phones/Long Distance;
   e. General Office Supplies;
   f. Postage;
   g. Stationary/Letterhead.
7. A copy of the approved research proposal and completed research is kept on file at the Department of Student Services for review;
8. Once research proposals are approved, any modifications to the approved methods, research instruments, populations, score, etc. are to be immediately brought to the attention of the Department of Student Services prior to continuing with said research;
9. Parents and staff members shall have the right to inspect such studies, and materials used in connection with such studies, on request;
10. Any data collection, reporting, and/or related research activity undertaken within, or by the [redacted] shall protect the privacy of students, parents, and employees;
11. Researchers are required to submit electronic copies of their completed research to the Department of Student Services upon successful completion of their defenses;
12. The [redacted] reserves the right to revoke Research
Approval at anytime. For your information, the Student Services Office is maintaining a copy of your approved research application which is available for review by personnel.

I wish you much success with your research!

Yours most truly,

Coordinator of Assessments and Research
APPENDIX J

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

8/11/2016

Micole Atkins Talley
IRB Approval 2567.081116: A Phenomenological Study of Ninth Grade Special Needs Students’ Perceptions of Educational Settings

Dear Micole Atkins Talley,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

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

Sincerely,

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX K

Researcher’s Reflective Log (excerpt)

October 28, 2016, 1:15 p.m.

I just completed my individual interview with Ralph (pseudonym). I was taken by surprise by his appearance. There were two things that I noticed immediately about him. First, his clothes did not fit him well and looked as though they may have belonged to someone else. Secondly, he was missing one of his front teeth. However, when he entered the room he was smiling and seemed like he wanted to talk to me. He sat down quietly across from me. I asked him to wait for a few minutes while I made some adjustment to the recorder and then I would explain what we were about to do. While I was preparing the recorder, I wondered why he did not look well taken care of and if the school social worker was involved. Then I thought about the fact that my role for the day was to gather information for this study and not to make judgments about his appearance. I explained the interview process to Ralph. He was attentive when I spoke directly to him but often looked down when I was not speaking. I thought that he may be uncomfortable and/or shy. I was worried that he might tell me that he was teased by his peers. When I began asking Ralph interview questions, his answers were positive about his interactions with his peers. I asked him two clarifying questions and he elaborated on his answers. I found myself feeling surprised and determined that I needed to be mindful of allowing my thoughts to be judgmental of student answers. I also decided to make sure that my probing question did not lead students to answers but just prompted them to give me more details to support their original statements.