

AN APPLIED STUDY EXAMINING INCLUSION MODELS IN AN ALL-GIRLS RHODE  
ISLAND CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

by

Shannon McMahon

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Constance Pearson, Committee Chair

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to seek to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girls, Catholic school in Rhode Island, that addresses the students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and to design a proposal of recommendations, using a multi-method approach. Particular attention was given to the merits of peer mentoring as an effective inclusion strategy. The central research question was "How can the problem of lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island?" Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including interviews with teachers and administrators at St. Teresa's Catholic School; a survey of teachers and administrators at St. Teresa's Catholic School; and a document review from Sacred Heart Academy's Options Program, which included IEP, demographic, and curriculum data and testimonials from program stakeholders. Data were analyzed for codes and themes, from which the solution to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming at St. Teresa's Catholic School was derived. Results indicated the creation of an Options Program for girls in Rhode Island is a solution to the lack of comprehensive special education programming in Catholic secondary schools. A secondary solution is the creation of an advocacy group which supports the creation and expansion of special education programs.

*Keywords:* inclusion, peer mentoring, special education, secondary education, Catholic education.

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to all students for whom learning is a challenge, in the hopes that research and education can solve problems and find solutions to make their lives fulfilling and joyous.

In particular, this is dedicated to my daughter Natalie, whose smile in her accomplishments makes the struggles worthwhile. She humbles me daily, and I thank God He blessed me with her, and all my other children: Emily, Thomas, Abigail, Jack, Lily, Laurel, Mary, Charlotte, Rose, and James.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

Individual Catholic Education Plan (ICEP)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming that addresses the students' academic, social, and emotional needs in an all-girls, private school in Rhode Island; and to design a proposal of recommendations. While many students are educated in inclusion models alongside their typical peers, an inclusion model by itself is not sufficient in addressing the adolescent students' social and emotional needs. Students with disabilities, in addition to having delays in academic performance, often present with delays in social development (Espelage et al., 2016). These students may have difficulty initiating relationships, interpreting social cues, and forming close friendships. An inclusive classroom that incorporates peer support provides students with increased opportunities for social interaction and friendships (Logsdon et al., 2018).

This section examined the historical and social background of the issue, as well as describe the purpose of the study and the problem to be solved. Next, the significance of the research and the impact the problem has on the stakeholders involved is discussed. Finally, the research questions are stated.

### **Background**

While the practice of including students with special needs in general education settings has expanded over the decades, the term inclusion continues to lack a universal definition in the educational community (Olson et al., 2016; Schwab et al., 2018). There is a lack of agreement on the scope of inclusive practices and what specific interventions should be utilized. Peer mentoring or peer support is an evidenced-based intervention that allows students with disabilities to be supported by their regular education peers (Logsdon et al., 2018).

## **Historical Background**

Beginning in 1975, legislation was introduced that required public schools to educate students with disabilities (Lipkin et al., 2018). This was reauthorized in 1990 as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and stipulated that students with disabilities be educated alongside their regular education peers as often as appropriate (Brock, 2018). This concept is known as the least restrictive environment (LRE) and has become the standard by which the education of students with disabilities is measured. IDEA included the provision of more access to the general education curriculum, which allows students with disabilities to have increased interactions with general education peers. In 2004, IDEA was revised again (Carter et al., 2016). and while it not only affirmed the previous sentiment, it also supported having high expectations for children with disabilities. Rhode Island has one of the highest percentages of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), with 17.6 percent of Rhode Island's students having disabilities, compared to the U.S. average of 13 percent (RI KidsCount Factbook, 2018). In 2016, 72% of students ages six to 21 receiving special education services in Rhode Island were in a regular class for 80% of the day or more (RI KidsCount Factbook, 2018).

## **Social Background**

Inclusion entails students with disabilities spending some portion of their school day with their general education peers (Kauffman et al., 2018; Krischler et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017). Within this model, there are several intervention approaches that support students with disabilities (Ruppert et al., 2017). Kuntz and Carter (2019) detailed several broad approaches outlining the spectrum of interventions. Among these include systematic instruction, self-management strategies, educational placement changes, and peer support (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). Peer support is becoming more widely utilized as an effective strategy in inclusive

classrooms. Not only did this intervention improve outcomes in social and communication domains, but was also found to aid in associated goals, such as those of self-management and academics. Although much progress has been made in the area of inclusion, students with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, are some of the most excluded and socially vulnerable (Wilson & Scior, 2015). Additionally, academic challenges and deficits in communication skills present obstacles for this population, specifically as they enter high school (Chung et al., 2019; DeVroey et al., 2016). In adolescence, students' social and academic lives are connected, and while social inclusion cannot ensure academic success, experiences of exclusion can hinder educational engagement and performance (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Mentorship, as a concept, originated in Homer's *Odyssey* and describes a relationship in which one individual provides guidance, support, or training to another (Akinla, et al., 2018). Peer mentorship was introduced by Paulo Freire in the 1960s as a tool to better equip students in academic, personal, and social development (Freire Institute, 2020). The "Options" program at Sacred Heart Academy, a RI Catholic school for boys, was founded in 2008 and is the only inclusive program with a peer mentoring element in the state of Rhode Island – one of five such programs nationwide (Donohue, 2008). Brock (2018) pointed out that mentoring relationships, while having the obvious benefit for the mentee, have also shown to improve the academic performance of the non-disabled mentors. Therefore, mentorship is a valid, effective, and beneficial strategy for use in inclusive classrooms.

Students with disabilities report that their ideal educational experience includes peers and classmates that show respect and friendliness and who can be available for help when needed (Nieto & Moliña, 2019). Other attributes described as optimal in inclusive schools, according to students with disabilities, include adapted content, equal treatment, competent and well-trained

teachers in special education, and programs that are based on universal design for learning (UDL) (Rao et al., 2017).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The central theory to support this research is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which originally suggested that person–environment interactions take place at four different levels of systems: Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), all of which have a direct effect on an individual's success. The microsystem, as the most basic level, relates to peer mentoring as it highlights the significance of supportive relationships. According to Bronfenbrenner, a supportive relationship exists “whenever one person in a setting pays attention to or participates in the activities of another” (p. 56). The mesosystem refers to the connectedness between settings, such as a home-school relationship. The exosystem refers to the institutional or organizational factors that do not represent a direct relationship to an individual. The macrosystem incorporates the cultural values, such as religion, that can indirectly affect an individual. This is relevant to this study, as the setting is a Catholic school, and therefore, is within the students' sphere of influence. Bronfenbrenner later introduced a fifth level, a chronosystem, which indicates how a person's stage in life can impact their relationship functioning (Bluteau et al., 2017). This is particularly significant, as the students involved are in the adolescent stage of life.

Additionally, relational mentoring theory is significant in expressing the quality of mentoring relationships on a continuum and recognizes that the quality of relationships can shift among relationships and evolve over time (Humberd & Rouse, 2016). This theory identifies three types of relationships, beginning with dysfunctional, which describes a poor-quality relationship. A traditional relationship, secondarily, is an average relationship in which the



mentee receives the most benefit. Lastly, the relational type occurs when both the mentee and mentor benefit by experiencing mutual growth, learning, and development (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Janssen et al., 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for female students with disabilities in a Catholic all-girls school in Rhode Island. While students may be exposed to the general education curriculum through inclusion, skills in social development are not specifically addressed. While some students with disabilities in Rhode Island Catholic schools for girls access the general education curriculum, no specific inclusion model is in place and no provision for social inclusion is currently addressed. Typically, students with special educational needs are supported in inclusive classrooms by paraprofessionals. Sharma and Salend (2016) suggest over-reliance on this paraprofessional support, particularly when it involves untrained or undertrained personnel, which may lead to unforeseen negative effects. This may include the labeling of students and the continuing dependence on adults in the classroom, which may undermine learning and socialization (Carter et al., 2016; Huber et al., 2018; Rayner, 2018). Peer mentoring interventions allow a same-age peer to serve many of the same functions, such as adapting classroom tasks and providing instruction and feedback, which contribute to the students' levels of engagement – not only in the classroom, but also within a social context. Programs employing an ongoing peer mentoring program, such as the Options program, are designed to address the need for social integration of students with special educational needs. Social integration, in turn, leads to decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation, and increased motivation and self-esteem (Bradley, 2016; Stiefel et al., 2018).

There is much current research that highlights the effectiveness of peer mentoring in higher education with first-year students (Griffin et al., 2016; Hillier et al., 2019; Topping et al., 2016). At this level, research indicates the recurring themes of increased academic and social skills (Hillier et al., 2019). Other studies have demonstrated positive effects of short-term peer mentoring programs at the elementary level, including increased motivation and self-esteem (Puckett et al., 2017). These were performed as research study interventions; however, more research is needed to examine any system-wide, long-term models currently in practice. The proposed study will seek to address the problem of lack of a comprehensive special education inclusion program that incorporates peer mentoring at the secondary level. Both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to evaluate an existing program to be used as a model to replicate at a Catholic all-girls school in Rhode Island. Permission has been secured to allow for this research at St. Teresa's Catholic School (Appendix B).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of the lack of comprehensive, inclusive special education programming in St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island, and to formulate a solution to address the problem. A multimethod design was used, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators to gather perceptions of inclusive practices for the purposes of solving the problem. The second approach was a researcher-designed survey given to the teachers and administrators to gather perceptions of inclusive practices. The third approach was the collection of statistical records and archival data from which to gather background information and pose subsequent questioning.

### **Significance of the Study**

Rhode Island has one of the highest percentages of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), with 17.6 percent of Rhode Island's students having disabilities, compared to the U.S. average of 13 percent (RI KidsCount Factbook, 2018). In the Northeast United States, Catholic school enrollment has decreased over the past twenty years (Ee, et al., 2018). This study aims to explore the programs available to students with disabilities at the secondary level in a Catholic High School. The stakeholders for this research are the students with disabilities; the general education mentors; the school community at large, including teachers and administration; parents and the Catholic church. While the benefits to students with special educational needs have been outlined, there are clear positive outcomes for mentors, as well. Griffin et al. (2016) studied the motivations and experiences of mentors and found that students who volunteer as mentors valued the friendships created, a sense of personal growth, and involvement in the school community. Both general and special educators can reap the benefits of the peer-mentoring model, as it offers an alternative support system in a classroom of students with varying academic and social needs (Carter et al., 2015). A study of principal and educator perceptions revealed their belief that mentors are uniquely suited to providing support to students who value the input of same-aged peers (Brady et al., 2014). Bossaert et al. (2011) purported that parents of students with special educational needs encourage maximum inclusion in a general education setting and that the inclusion with typical peers will not only have an immediate impact on their own child but will also result in a change in attitude towards children with disabilities in society.

## Research Questions

**Central question:** How can the problem of lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 1:** How would teachers and administrators in an interview solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 2:** How would teachers and administrators in surveys solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 3:** How would a document analysis be used to inform the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island?

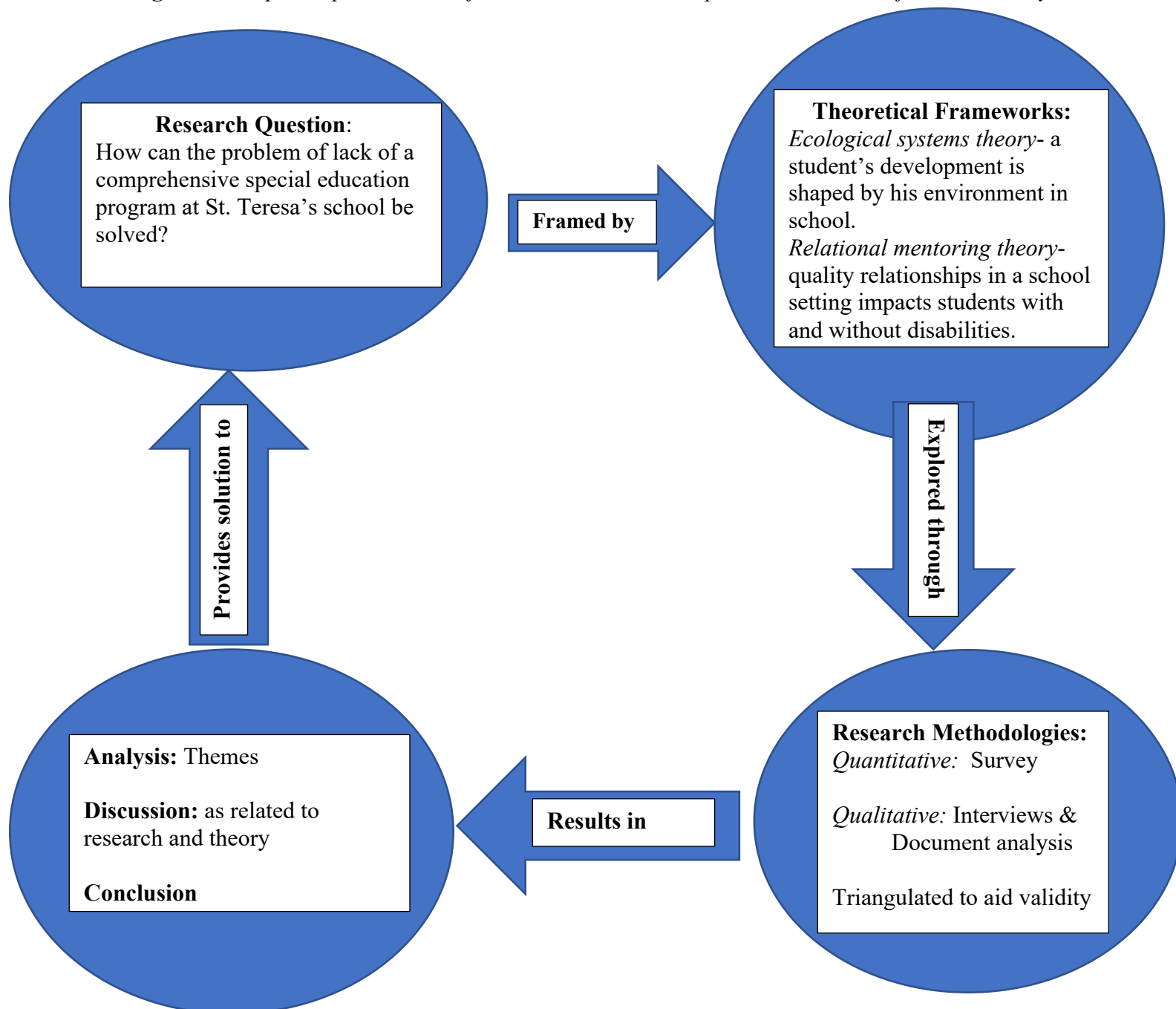
## Definitions

1. *IDEA* - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – This legislation guarantees children with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment, including the provision of more access to the general education curriculum (IDEA, n.d).
2. *IEP* - Individualized Education Plan – This is a legal document, in which parents and school personnel determine specific supports and services the student will need to access general education (MacLeod et al., 2017).
3. *Inclusion* – This concept describes students with special education needs taking a full and active part in school life, being valued members of the school community, and be seen as integral members in the general school setting (Bossaert et al., 2013).
4. *LRE* - Least Restrictive Environment – Educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms, alongside general education peers to the maximum extent possible (Brock, 2018).

5. *Peer mentoring* – A formal relationship in which one student provides guidance and support to another student (Akinla et al., 2018).
6. *ICEP*- Individual Catholic Education Plan- A blueprint for responsive teaching around which a student's education is planned, focusing on the individual strengths and needs (<https://cjbschool.org/>, 2020)
7. *CST*- Catholic Social Teaching- The Catholic belief in the dignity of human life (USCCB, 2005).
8. *Options Program*- An inclusive education program founded on mainstreaming, peer mentoring, and life skills curriculum.

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the research process, beginning with the research question, informed by the literature and theory, leading to the data collection methods, and culminating in an analysis aimed at proposing a solution to the problem.

**Figure 1:** *Graphic representation of related theoretical and practical elements of research study*



## Summary

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in general education classes is an effective way to educate these students in the least restrictive environment (Bakken, 2016; Lipkin et al., 2015). While this model may adequately meet their academic needs, the social development of students with disabilities may not be addressed by mere inclusion alone (Ruppar, 2017). Peer mentoring, in conjunction with inclusion, is a more comprehensive model that emphasizes the development of students' academic, social, and emotional skills, particularly at the secondary level (Griffin, 2016). In Rhode Island, there is a lack of comprehensive programs, known as "Options" programs, in which to fully educate students with disabilities in a Catholic school environment (Donohue, 2008). The purpose of this study was to solve the problem of the lack of comprehensive, inclusive special education programming in St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island, and to formulate a solution to address the problem.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This literature review begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework that guides the study. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is the central theory that discusses students' spheres of influence and their relationship to inclusion. Also addressed is relational mentoring theory, which examines relationship quality and its effect on peer support (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Janssen et al., 2015). Following this, a review of the empirical literature examines inclusion practices in secondary schools, with a focus on peer mentoring. The review discusses the historical context of inclusion in public and private schools, current practices, and effective strategies for improvement. An advanced electronic search of Liberty University's Jerry Falwell Library was used to locate peer-reviewed articles published from 2015-2020. The topics searched for included inclusion, secondary schools, peer mentoring, and special education, and were used to narrow the search for the most relevant and current research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An applied study is supported by a theoretical framework, which incorporates the researcher's beliefs and provides the structure of the research as a whole (Grant & Osanloo, 2016). This study was based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which asserts that an individual exists among interconnected systems and the development of the person is a result of the interactions between the systems (Kamenopoulou, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Kamenopolou (2016) explored the utilization of ecological systems theory in research on Inclusion and Special Educational needs and found the theory to be a valuable tool for exploring the phenomenon of inclusion while investigating the many overlapping factors that impact students in inclusive settings (Kamenopolou, 2016). Relational mentoring theory was also used



to frame the emphasis on peer support models as integral to comprehensive inclusion models. Simola (2016) highlighted the importance of the relational, rather than unidirectional, nature of mentoring partnerships that offer benefits to both individuals.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

An individual interacts with distinct social structures that affect their experiences, perceptions, and self-identity. This concept was referred to by Uri Bronfenbrenner as the ecological systems theory, and it can be used to illustrate the influence interconnected systems can have on students with disabilities and their access to general education services (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Edwards, 2019; Ruppert et al., 2017).

### ***Microsystem***

The student is at the center of the model and several overlapping systems impact him/her and decisions made on the student's behalf (Kamenopolou, 2016). The microsystem includes the most immediate environments encountered by a student, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers, and peers. For students with disabilities, the special education teacher has a primary role in determining a student's access to the general education content (Ruppert et al., 2017). These teachers may use the student's cognitive ability, in conjunction with their own perceptions of the expected outcomes, to inform their decision making. Paraprofessionals also directly support students with disabilities, and while they tend to make curriculum decisions, research has noted concerns with paraprofessional use and its potential adverse impact on student achievement (Carter et al., 2016; Huber et al., 2018; Rayner, 2018; Ruppert et al., 2017; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Rayner (2018) suggested paraprofessionals may be better utilized in lowering teacher-student ratios and in team-teaching capacities. Peers are also among the influences in the microsystem, and peer support strategies and interventions have been recognized as effective

supports for students with disabilities (Ruppar et al., 2017). The positive effects include aiding academic achievement, and increasing social and communication skills (Bradley, 2016; Carter et al., 2016; Hillier et al., 2019; Puckett et al., 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017).

### ***Mesosystem***

Students with disabilities are provided an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which outlines a student's performance goals and eligible services. The IEP team, which consists of professionals that work collaboratively, represent a mesosystem as two or more microsystems working together (Ruppar et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). IEP teams are often comprised of educators, parents, administrators, and support staff who make placement decisions (Kamenopoulou, 2016). Additionally, decisions in appropriate content and instructional approaches are planned at the team level.

### ***Exosystem***

Bronfenbrenner's third system, the exosystem, consists of social systems or processes that can indirectly impact the student and his environment (Ruppar et al., 2017). Research has indicated that teacher attitudes and education can guide their opinions of, and decision making on, students' access to general education opportunities (Ruppar et al., 2017; Timberlake, 2016). Additionally, teacher training or professional development in inclusive practices can impact the educators' perceptions, and in turn, their use of evidenced-based practices, such as universal design for learning (UDL) or flexible grouping.

### ***Macrosystem***

The macrosystem level, according to Bronfenbrenner's theory, consists of formal policies, relationships among them, and social or cultural factors (Ruppar et al., 2017). IDEA and other policies guide state and district decisions in complying with the LRE requirement.

Administrators and educators are tasked with interpreting student data and making subsequent placement decisions. The culture of the school is also a consideration in the overall support of inclusive practices (Ruppar et al., 2017). In this study, religious beliefs and economic status are factors in the macrosystem, which influence inclusive practices in Catholic schools (Kamenopoulou, 2016).

### ***Chronosystem***

Bronfenbrenner described the chronosystem as the concept of change or constancy over time or environment for an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The chronosystem can also be viewed as the link between all the other systems (Nazari et al., 2017). Specific to inclusion opportunities, the chronosystem includes not only times of change in a student's personal life, but also transitions in educational placement or location. The concept of inclusion can be viewed through the lens of these five inter-related systems that shape the educational experience of a student with special educational needs.

### **Relational Mentoring Theory**

In a discussion of inclusion, peer relations are a significant consideration. Relational mentoring theory takes into account the relationship between an individual with more experience, the mentor; and one with less experience, the protege (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Simola, 2016). In a peer-support intervention, students interact in a two-way, mutual relationship that fosters growth and learning. Janssen et al. (2015) underscored this concept and suggested that mentorship is not based on anticipated benefits, but rather on the reciprocal experience of connection. Simola (2016) concurs with this assertion and describes relational mentoring as a unique, dynamic, reciprocal learning partnership that is often used in education to support emotional and psychosocial goals. Relational mentoring theory examines the quality of

relationships on a continuum, which can evolve over time and as a result of circumstances. Humberd and Rouse (2016) describe indicators that may impact quality of relationships: communal norms, demographic similarities, and the degree of formality of the interaction. Relational mentoring can be formal or informal, internal or external, and is centered around caregiving and receiving, which can lead to positive outcomes (Simola, 2016). Additionally, this aligns well with the more current view of inclusion on a broader level. This theory can provide a framework for designing inclusive, peer-support programming at the secondary level.

### **Related Literature**

This related literature section examines the historical significance of educating students with special educational needs, specifically the practice of inclusion. Inclusion practices in Christian schools will also be discussed, as it has particular relevance to the research problem. Past and current interventions and strategies utilized in secondary schools will be highlighted and a significant discussion will delve into peer-support programming.

### **Historical Context**

The last 45 years have been a time of much reform in the area of special education. With the adoption of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, students with special educational needs are afforded the right to be provided a public education. IDEA was enacted in response to concerns that states were not providing adequate public education to students with disabilities (Lipkin et al., 2018). IDEA contains several key concepts, including free and appropriate education (FAPE), identification and evaluation of students, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), due process, and shared responsibility (Kirby, 2017; Lipkin et al., 2015). Additionally, the notion of the least restrictive environment (LRE) is a significant concept conveyed in IDEA (Brock, 2018; Kirby, 2017; Lipkin et al., 2015). LRE aims to

educate students with disabilities alongside peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, with appropriateness being determined by the IEP team, within a range of options. (Bakken, 2016; Lipkin et al., 2015). The general education setting represents the least restrictive setting, while pull-out and resource services exist midway in the scope of service models. Self-contained classrooms and specialized schools and institutions constitute more restrictive settings on the continuum.

The term mainstreaming was adopted in the 1980s to indicate the inclusion of students with special educational needs in general education classrooms (Young & Courtad, 2016). The 1980s and 1990s brought forth the Regular Education Initiative (REI), which was more collaborative in nature and expressed support of the concept of shared responsibility among stakeholders (Young & Courtad, 2016). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was an important civil rights law that expressed equality for all individuals, regardless of disability, in all areas of life – social, employment, and education (Gostin, 2015). It was viewed as legislation that embodied compassionate values that could promote social change by harnessing the potential of individuals with disabilities (Gostin, 2015). In 2004, IDEA was amended and referred to as IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). IDEIA emphasized that not only were children with disabilities expected to be placed in general education classrooms, but more attention was placed on having higher expectations for these students with special educational needs (Carter et al., 2016). Some of the changes included an expanded clarification of the IEP process and also stipulated that goals for students with disabilities should be more aligned with the goals of their peers. Worldwide, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006 started the concept of inclusion at a societal level but placed emphasis on educational contexts (Paseka & Schwab,

2020). It was also articulated that the onus be placed on organizations, including schools, to reduce barriers to include students with disabilities.

Although the last 45 years have brought an evolution in the manner in which students with disabilities are educated, Kirby (2017) suggests that U.S systems approach disability as a deviant issue that should be eradicated, and special education services should be separate. The following elucidates research findings that offer various points and perspectives to illustrate the debate surrounding inclusion.

### **Inclusion**

Rayner (2018) described inclusive education as a “set of values and processes that nurture all students’ sense of belonging and connection to place, people, and purpose” (p.19), and states inclusion “involves fostering students’ sense of connection to the learning environment; it’s not just about where they are, it’s about how they feel when they are there” (p. 20). This definition represents my view on inclusion throughout this document. Additionally, my Christian worldview is based on the Golden Rule and seeing the face of Christ in others, particularly the marginalized among us. Vallone (2014) stated that since none of us can really be Christ, the phrase is clearly a metaphor that urges us to ground our thoughts, words, and deeds in love, as He did. Historically, the term inclusion in education was first introduced in 1994 at the United Nations Salamanca Conference (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018). Today, however, inclusion is a term that is widely used but ill-defined in an educational context (Kauffman et al., 2018; Krischler et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017). Generally, inclusion is meant to include students with disabilities in general education settings; however, students being educated in the LRE does not necessarily specify educational placement (Young & Courtad, 2016). Whereas the previously used term “mainstreaming” connotes that the child must adapt to the

environment, the term “inclusion” suggests the general education curriculum can be adapted to fit the needs of the student with disabilities (Young & Courtad, 2016). While some advocate for full inclusion or educating students with disabilities entirely in a general education setting, much is left for interpretation. The definitions of, and attitudes towards, inclusion seem to be associated with one’s personal experience with inclusion. In a study by Krischler et al. (2019), educators were asked to define inclusion. The resulting definitions were synthesized into three categories: Placing students with disabilities in a general education classroom, meeting the social and academic needs of students with disabilities, or meeting the social and academic needs of all students (Krishler et al., 2019). In this study, attitudes towards the concept of inclusion were linked to a teacher’s level of preparation and knowledge of inclusive practices. Conversely, a global study of teacher attitudes towards inclusion revealed these educators had a moderately high self-efficacy for inclusive practices, even if they were under-trained or lacked experience (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018). Brock (2018) asserted that educational trends illustrate a lack of commitment to inclusion at even its most basic level, the LRE. From 1990 to 2001, more students were being educated in least restrictive settings; however, this shifted from 2001 to 2007 when educational placements reverted to more prohibitive placements for students with disabilities (Brock, 2018). In fact, over the past forty years, between 55.3% and 73.1% of students with intellectual disabilities were still being educated in self-contained classrooms (Brock, 2018). This number remained stable until approximately 2014. However, Burke and Griffin (2016) suggest that the inclusion of students with disabilities is possible through a combination of family advocacy, staff support and commitment, and the development of needed supports.

Opponents of full inclusion, who take a more temperate stance on their inclusion views, favor inclusion practices that are more workable, realistic, and reachable (Kauffman et al., 2018). While they agree that all students be afforded the right to the “common project of learning” (p. 1), supporters of a conservative form of inclusion contend that full inclusion does not mean all children be educated in general education settings. In fact, critics of full inclusion purport that spending the majority of their time in general education classes is not always best for the student and can also hinder student outcomes (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016). This view suggests that inclusion be more focused on the appropriateness and restrictiveness of the concepts expressed in IDEA, namely free and appropriate education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE).

Roberts and Simpson’s (2016) research found that while many practitioners held a broad philosophical commitment to inclusion, they believed policies designed to implement inclusion were rarely put into practice. Much research, however, has been conducted, demonstrating the benefits of inclusive practices for students with disabilities. The inclusion of students in general education classrooms can aid academic progress, increase positive adaptive and behavioral skills, and improve social outcomes through the creation of peer friendships (Bakken, 2016; Brock, 2018; Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015). Additional benefits include a decrease in school absences, gains in literacy, and an increase in overall school outcomes (Bakken, 2016). Oh-Young and Filler (2015) evaluated the outcomes of students with disabilities in integrated placements as opposed to less-integrated placements. Results indicated a significant difference existed between the two settings and students with disabilities outperformed their more restricted counterparts in academic and social measures. Giangreco (2017) detailed several characteristics of general education classes of which students could benefit. These include highly qualified



teachers, academic and social modeling from peers without disabilities, and opportunities to form a range of relationships and gain exposure to varied experiences (Giangreco, 2017).

The international view of inclusion, which is slowly taking hold in the U.S., is broader and seen as a reform that responds to diversity, by placing value on the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Vaz et al., 2015). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) voiced the sentiment that all learners should be treated equally in education, and that system-wide changes are needed to put theory into practice (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). They proposed that the two most important factors that can inhibit or promote inclusive practices are clarity of definition and the use of evidence. In terms of clearly defining the practice of inclusion, UNESCO suggests it should be an evidenced-based, continuous process of identifying and removing barriers that aims to serve at-risk learners (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). The use of evidence is approached cautiously, as test scores and standardized data, while an important measure, can represent a narrow gauge of student achievement (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018).

Social inclusion, according to Edwards (2019) is the presence of not only positive social contact between a student with disabilities and a neurotypical peer, but also incorporates acceptance of the student with a disability, a social friendship, and the perception of acceptance by the student. Edwards (2019) employed contact theory to explain how inclusive education can support social inclusion. Furthermore, while simply placing children in the same physical space in classrooms as their non-disabled peers does not guarantee inclusion, it is a foundation that will enhance opportunities for inclusion, and subsequently promote acceptance and friendship. Inclusion, then, offers the possibility of changing negative attitudes and stigmas, and encouraging social inclusion (Edwards, 2019).

### *Current Practices and Strategies*

As there is ambiguity in the meaning of inclusion of students with disabilities, so also is there lack of agreement on which interventions represent best practices. Research evidence from Gustavsson and Tøssebro (2017) indicates positive results for the majority of interventions reviewed. This suggests that with a number of effective intervention options, the next step for educators is to match students with specific strategies.

One strategy, readily available to educators and service providers, is the ability to provide attention and support to their pupils. Teacher support and attention have been shown to promote children's motivation and control, which in turn, impacts students' self-perception of their ability in school, and their overall academic performance (Gustavsson & Tøssebro, 2017). While the range of strategies is vast, much research has centered around five main intervention approaches. Studies grouped the approaches into systematic instruction, peer support arrangements, self-management strategies, peer-mediated communication, and educational placement changes (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). Kuntz and Carter (2019) found that these interventions were successful in improving either an academic, behavioral, or social outcome and often, a secondary outcome was also ameliorated. For example, while peer support arrangements typically target improving social or communicative skills, this intervention can also increase academic engagement. Additionally, the interventions can be used together to create a more comprehensive collection of strategies for use with students with disabilities. IEP teams can draw upon this toolbox to create a more individualized program of approaches when aiming to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Universal Design for Learning.** According to Rao et al., (2017) Universal Design for Learning (UDL), has the capacity to provide inclusionary options for students with disabilities in

general education classrooms. In fact, UDL extinguishes the terms “special” and “regular” as descriptors, as it is assumed that all learners have unique learning styles and needs (Hunt, 2019). UDL began as architectural modifications to ensure buildings were accessible to all students and was later applied to the accessibility of educational materials, as well (Hunt, 2019; Young & Courtad, 2016). Since the 2000s, UDL is an approach to curriculum design that is grounded in differentiation and flexibility of instruction, which can increase inclusive opportunities for students. Biliias-Lolis et al. (2017) suggested UDL has the capacity to reduce the marginalization of students with disabilities, while making the focus of inclusion more on the accessibility of curriculum content and skills, as opposed to a location or setting. UDL is based on the principles of offering multiple modes of representation, action, expression, and engagement (Hunt, 2019; Rao et al., 2017). It is designed to be implemented both proactively and responsively, and includes the use of evidence-based practices such as positive reinforcement and individual preferences. The goal of UDL is to provide access to the general education curriculum through the use of purposefully chosen support strategies based on the individual learning styles of the students. Proponents of UDL stress that educational content is the most important aspect, and educators must provide various pathways by which the content can be accessed (Hunt, 2019). UDL has the potential to become the foundation from which other solutions and strategies are based (Rayner, 2018; Smith & Lowrey, 2017).

**Collaboration.** Integral to effective inclusion is the collaboration among educators, which can be difficult to apply practically in a school setting. The benefits are many, however, and warrant the effort in applying collaborative practices in inclusive settings. According to Mulholland and O’Connor (2016), collaboration provides both students with special needs and those without access to a wider range of instructional options and can increase academic

progress. Through the act of collaboration, teachers model cooperative skills, which promotes peer interactions and student self-esteem (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016).

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, a new model of collaboration has surfaced, most often referred to as co-teaching (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). In the traditional format, co-teaching or team teaching consisted of two teachers working together in the same general education classroom, which some argue, offered no additional value to the students (DeMartino & Specht, 2018). Studies indicated mixed results as to the efficacy of this format, as measured by both academic performance and scores on high-stakes testing (DeMartino and Specht, 2018). The delineation of roles, compatibility of teachers, and lack of teacher involvement and ownership presented the largest challenges, according to DeVroey et al. (2016). Akcamete & Gokbulut (2018) found that classroom teachers valued the support and expertise provided by special education teachers in co-teaching arrangements. DeMartino and Specht (2018) explored a modified form of this format, the Inclusive Collaboration Model (ICM). This model consists of a regular and special educator working collaboratively in the same classroom, with distinct roles delineated. ICM utilizes specially designed instruction (SDI), which delivers more flexible, individualized instruction to students with disabilities in the general classroom (DeMartino & Specht, 2018). Hunt (2019) describes co-teaching as a best of both worlds' scenario, with the curriculum knowledge of a general educator, combined with the expertise of a special educator, to provide a vast array of instructional techniques for all students (Hunt, 2019).

Stein (2017) and Akcamete and Gokbulut (2018) further divide co-teaching as a service delivery option into several possible arrangements. Stein recommends utilizing the strengths of both the co-teacher and needs of the learner when deciding which mode to use. One option

entails one teacher conducting a whole group lesson, while the second teacher circulates and assists students. Alternatively, one teacher can work with a small group, while another leads the rest of the class in a lesson. Station teaching allows each teacher to work with small groups while the students rotate among learning stations.

**Peer Support Programs.** Students without disabilities, who are general education peers, may be referred to as neurotypical or typically developing students. This terminology is meant to describe individuals without autism or other neurological conditions (Kuzminski et al., 2019). High school is a challenge for neurotypical students but can be more problematic for students with disabilities who may have difficulty not only with academic tasks, but also with communication skills and maintaining friendships (Carter et al., 2015). Compounded by larger class sizes, more complicated formats, and adolescent mindsets, students with disabilities are at a disadvantage in high school settings (De Vroey et al., 2016). Students with disabilities are at risk for overall poor high school experiences and potential for dropping out due to social isolation and feelings of loneliness (Chung et al., 2019). Ward, Thomas, and Disch (2020) described peer mentoring as “an ongoing relationship with a supportive person who can assist students with maneuvering challenges and opportunities” (p. 170). Peers are a viable alternative, or supplement, to the use of paraprofessional support in inclusive settings, and can act as a protective factor from potentially harmful outcomes (Chung et al., 2019). Peer mentoring makes learning opportunities available to students, particularly those in marginalized groups, like those with disabilities (Goodrich, 2017). Additionally, in terms of the LRE, even the most restrictive settings allow opportunities for students with disabilities and general education peers to interact, through after-school programs and community involvement (Lipkin et al. 2015).

Much research has elucidated the benefits of peer supports in higher education, including increased academic engagement and heightened social interactions (Griffin et al., 2016). At this level, peer mentors serve not only as academic tutors, but also provide support in planning and organization, and interact in social contexts (Griffin et al., 2016). Higher education models assure accountability of the mentors through guidance from program staff. The goal of such programs is to increase the independence of the students through an individualized, dynamic approach, while forging friendships that benefit both protégé and mentor (Griffin et al., 2016). The use of peer support programs to enhance inclusive practices at the secondary level is also gaining momentum among the research community. The use of peer mentoring supports is not meant to replace inclusive practices, but to augment and strengthen inclusion (Topping et al., 2017). Many studies have illustrated the various benefits peer-mediated interventions can have for use with students with disabilities in general education settings (Carter et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2016; Chung et al., 2019; Huber et al., 2018; Juvonen et al., 2019; Simplican et al., 2015; Wentzel, Jablansky, & Scalise, 2018). The advantages of peer support as an intervention are many. From a financial perspective, peers are resources that are already present in general education classrooms. No additional funding is required, and the supplemental manpower is minimal, as existing teachers can fill the role of overseeing the program. Peer-support arrangements can be implemented without modifying the instructional approaches for the general education class (Carter et al., 2015). The specific values of peer support are many and have been well-documented in the literature. Students demonstrated increased academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as improved advocacy and communication skills, as a result of peer support strategies in inclusive settings (Carter et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2019; Huber et al., 2018; Topping et al., 2017). While these outcomes are beneficial, the gains made in social skill

development is a notable effect and can therefore impact other outcomes. Research indicated the positive impact peer mentoring can have on goal attainment and student retention (Ward et al., 2020). Individuals with disabilities, similar to their non-disabled peers, strive to feel included and maintain friendships, which occurs more easily when given opportunities to interact with peers (Nieto & Morina, 2019).

Social exclusion has been shown to be a major concern, not only through bullying and victimization, but also with the less-obvious feelings of loneliness experienced by students with disabilities (Nieto & Morina, 2019). This is exacerbated by other restrictions, physical or logistical, experienced by these students. In defense of inclusion, Edwards (2019) purports that simply allowing for more contact between students with and without disabilities confronts negative attitudes and aids social inclusion. Callus (2017) explored the concept of friendship, as described by people with disabilities. These individuals expressed having a desire for forming friendships, but a lack of opportunity to do so. They describe friends as people they can trust, and who will support them (Callus, 2017). A peer-mediated model provides an opportunity for students with disabilities to establish relationships that support the students' social development. Additional benefits of peer mentoring exist in the areas of student leadership, and verbal and non-verbal interactions. Research by Topping et al. (2017) indicated an increase in students' leadership and problem-solving skills, as well as an increase in class and school participation. Students with disabilities also benefited from the verbal and non-verbal interaction with their peers. It was noted that significant learning occurred as students listened, watched, and imitated their peers in a less apparent manner (Topping et al., 2017).

Having positive social experiences enhances the students' overall attitude towards school (Wentzel et al., 2018). Conversely, when students with disabilities are worried or concerned

about peer relations, it can hinder their focus and decrease their engagement (Juvonen et al., 2019). Wentzel et al. (2018) examined the link between friendship and academic success, and results indicated a positive correlation between the two. Inclusion allows for an increased amount of time for students with disabilities to interact with peers in general education classrooms, and therefore, expands the opportunities for skill development aided by peer support (Carter et al., 2016). School peer relationships were found to lead to long-term friendships, including time spent in non-school leisure activities, which lasted after the school-based intervention period (Wentzel et al., 2018).

Practically speaking, an effective way to implement a peer-support program is through a proactive inclusion model (Juvonen et al., 2019). This entails administration increasing the diversity among the student body and then developing practices that increase opportunities for diverse students to engage with one another. Additionally, teachers must become educated on the use of inclusive strategies and promote shared goals (Juvonen et al., 2019). A proactive inclusion model includes the concepts of cooperative learning, modeling inclusive behaviors, and incorporating outside activities to bolster peer relationships.

Since the 1980s, programs incorporating a peer-support component have arisen to aid students with disabilities. In 1988, the Circle of Friends program was founded, with its overall goal of helping boost acceptance of students with disabilities among their typically developing peers (Hunt, 2019). It originated to assist adults with disabilities, but was adapted to enhance inclusion of special needs students in schools (Hunt, 2019). By creating opportunities to increase social interaction, identifying specific challenges in social skills, and providing social/emotional support, the Circle of Friends program has been quite successful. Studies by Hunt (2019) revealed the program helped increase peers' acceptance, respect, and understanding of students



with disabilities. A critique of the program cited the vertical, or one-sided, nature of the relationship in which only the disabled student was the beneficiary. The Yes I Can program, which is currently incorporated in 235 schools in North America, is based on the concept that typically developing peers can bridge the gap for students with disabilities (Hunt, 2019). While these programs are non-academic, they have been shown to increase feelings of acceptance and social connectedness among its participants (Hunt, 2019).

Hunt (2019) described classroom strategies that educators can utilize to promote effective inclusion. These include explaining the concept of disability to students, setting expectations, and using cooperative learning when appropriate. Above all, teachers should model respect, acceptance, and support of all students, and support peer interactions in non-academic settings (Hunt, 2019). Best Buddies is another such program that promotes the building of relationships between individuals with disabilities and typically developing peers, and highlights the importance of reducing stigma and raising acceptance for all diverse learners (Nguyen, 2020).

While there is a large emphasis on peers' responsibility in peer mentoring, teachers have a unique role in peer-support programs. With regards to organization, teachers are responsible for goal setting and training mentors at the outset of a program (Goodrich, 2017). Teachers should set expectations for the mentoring relationship and continue monitoring and facilitating throughout the process (Topping et al., 2017). These steps should ensure the peer mentors are qualified to relay curriculum effectively and act as appropriate social models for their mentees, which has been an articulated concern of peer-mentoring programs (Goodrich, 2017). Studies indicated that peers have more favorable perceptions of peer mentoring when the teacher had an active role in the facilitation of peer mentoring (Goodrich, 2017). Students who act as mentors in

some programs can be more effective than faculty in nurturing self-confidence in their mentees. (Ward et al., 2020. Non-disabled peers benefit from peer mentoring through gaining practice in leadership skills, resourcefulness, and character-building opportunities (Ward et al., 2020).

### ***Inclusion in Catholic Education***

As of 2010, 5.2 percent of over 53 million children in the U.S. were diagnosed with a disability (Koller, 2017). In 2015, 95 percent of Christian schools in California did not accept students with even mild learning disabilities (Bachrach, 2015); however, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) reports the number is on the rise (MacDonald, 2018). Although IDEA mandated a free and appropriate public education, IDEA stated that private and Christian schools are not required to accept students with disabilities (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).

Historically, in the 1900s, Catholic dioceses created segregated schools in an effort to provide education and support for individuals with disabilities (Burke & Griffin, 2016). The passage of IDEA prompted Catholic educators to find ways to educate students with disabilities in more inclusive settings. Several initiatives over the years have attempted to bridge the gap between those students who receive special education services in public schools. The NCEA has historically offered support for Catholic schools to find ways to include students with disabilities in general education settings (DeFiore, 2006). In fact, in 1998, the NCEA started the Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education (SPICE) to offer local schools direct instruction support, support for teachers and parents, and other shared resources through a consortium approach (DeFiore, 2006). Since then, several conferences have centered around how Catholic dioceses can address the issue of inclusion in Catholic schools by highlighting successful models as examples (DeFiore, 2006). Countless journal articles and convention sessions have been centered on Catholic inclusion, originally focusing on elementary schools, but slowly moving to

secondary schools, which presented an additional challenge (DeFiore, 2006). One considerable issue was the ability to balance standards of excellence, while still widening the range of learning options for students with disabilities (DeFiore, 2006). The response to the efforts over the years is disparate, with the most progress occurring in programs with involved and committed leadership, generally on a school-by-school basis, and with St. Louis schools presenting with the longest, most successful inclusion efforts (DeFiore, 2006).

The rationale for the exclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools is often cited as the lack of financial and professional resources (Bachrach, 2015; Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). IDEA specified, through the Proportionate Share Plans, that districts spend a proportionate share of their federal funds on the education of students in private schools (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). This fact, coupled with a lack of local funding, leaves a large segment of the population of students with disabilities with inability to access a Christian or otherwise private education. Of the categories of disabilities, Catholic schools are more likely to accept students with the higher-incidence disabilities (hearing impairment or deafness, developmental delay, speech/language, uncorrected vision impairment or blindness, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments). Students with low-incidence disability categories such as intellectual disabilities, autism, and emotional disorders are therefore underrepresented – not only in Catholic schools, but also in public schools, as well (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).

The pressure to provide academic excellence, which might be diminished with the inclusion of students with disabilities, is often cited for the lack of these students being educated in Catholic schools. Several studies, however, have examined this impact and found that the inclusion of students with special needs did not hinder the outcomes for non-disabled students (Bachrach, 2015). Young and Courtad (2016) found that not only were the general education

students not negatively affected, but they also presented with increased academic outcomes as a result of inclusion.

The school culture of accepting inclusion as a concept is often dependent on the attitudes of the principal and school leadership (Schmidt, 2017; Sigstad, 2017; Simola, 2016). Only 37% of Christian school principals in a major West Virginia diocese felt prepared to teach students with disabilities (Lane, 2017). Principals and administrators cite lack of professional development and resources as barriers to inclusion (Schmidt, 2017; Sigstad, 2017; Simola, 2016). Little training is available that is specifically geared toward Christian school special education programming and services (Lane, 2017). Schmidt (2017) argued, however, that teachers underestimate their ability to teach students with special needs and can utilize the traits and skills many possess inherently. These include, but are not limited to, empathy, creativity, collaboration, vision, and subject-area knowledge (Schmidt, 2017).

A major consideration in the inclusion of students with disabilities in faith-based schools is the institution's mission. If schools claim to be Christian or Catholic, they should strive to adhere to the teachings of their respective faiths (Bachrach, 2016; Schmidt, 2017). Using Jesus' example and teaching, Matthew 28:19 encourages educators to "go and make disciples," which can be translated to "learners" (Rayner, 2018). From a biblical perspective, then, Christian schools are called to educate all students, regardless of individual learning differences. Catholic education, in particular, according to Boyle and Bernards (n.d.), offers a spiritual form of a faith community that cannot be replicated in a public school. A 2002 study by the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) showed that a mere 7% of children with disabilities are enrolled in Catholic schools (Boyle & Bernards, n.d). The Vatican has always stressed the importance of families supporting children with special needs in education and has more recently

emphasized that both church and state should also support these vulnerable students (DeFiore, 2006). The USCCB also articulated a call to action for Catholic schools to find feasible ways of educating the special education population. In fact, the USCCB states that “Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty” (USCCB 1998 taken from Boyle & Bernards, n.d., p 2). Catholic schools need to cultivate programs that permit students to grow in their faith through Catholic education. Although they do not have a legal obligation to accept or teach students with disabilities, Catholic schools have a moral obligation, as it aligns with the Church’s teaching (DeFiore, 2006). The USCCB delineates seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that are the foundation for moral life. These include the life and dignity of the human person, call to family, community and participation, rights and responsibilities, option for the poor and vulnerable, the dignity of work, the rights of workers, solidarity, and care for God’s creation (USCCB, 2005). Many of these themes relate to the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic education. The Catholic Church affirms that all human life is sacred and that how individuals are included in a society impacts the dignity of the person and the opportunity for growth within a community (USCCB, 2005). Additionally, the condition of the most vulnerable members of a group illustrate the overall moral status of the group.

**Catholic School Inclusion Models.** The St. Joseph Options Program is an example of an inclusion model currently serving secondary students at Sacred Heart Academy, an all-boys school in Warwick, Rhode Island (N. Kessimian, personal communication, June 7, 2020). The program, founded in 2008, serves students with mild to moderate developmental and intellectual disabilities, through a merging of inclusion and peer mentoring (Donohue, 2008). Bishop Hendricken piloted the program after learning about it from a National Catholic Educational

Association (NCEA) conference, and now it is one of five such programs nationwide (Donohue, 2008). Pope Paul VI High School, in Fairfax, Virginia, already had a successful Options program instituted, and Sacred Heart used this as a model. The administration of Sacred Heart was sparked to develop this program after reflecting on a pastoral statement by the U.S. Catholic Bishops (1998), which read:

Realizing the unique gifts children with developmental disabilities have to offer the Church, we wish to address the need for their integration into the Christian community and fuller participation in its life. There can be no separate Church for people with disabilities. (p. 1)

The program begins with the students with disabilities receiving instruction from a special educator in English and math. The students matriculate with their general education peers for the remaining subjects, where the peers offer in-class support to the Options students through note taking and reading tests and quizzes. In addition to the time spent supporting students in the class, peers also participate in extracurricular and out-of-school social events with their Options students. The peers are chosen through an application process and give up their study period to participate. Invariably many peers are not matched with a student due to the small number of Options students. In the 2019-2020 school year, there were 11 Options students in total, with a grade maximum of four per grade (N. Kessimian, personal communication, June 7, 2020). The program emphasizes the learning of life skills, and while college preparation is not necessarily the goal of the program, many Options students have attended college after graduation.

The Burke Scholars program started in 2009 in Chicago, Illinois as part of an inclusion initiative at Notre Dame College Preparatory School (Burke & Griffin, 2016). This program continues to serve high-school males with mild to moderate intellectual disability, including

those with autism, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome (Burke & Griffin, 2016). The program incorporates a peer-support component and is designed to provide access to not only academic inclusion opportunities, but also social and spiritual inclusion (Burke & Griffin, 2016).

In Kensington, Maryland, the Academy of the Holy Cross instituted the Moreau Options program in 2014 (Dearie, 2019). This program was designed to provide an opportunity for inclusion for high schoolers in an all-girls Catholic School. The curriculum is student focused and intended to fit the unique needs of each student, in a Christ-centered community (Dearie, 2019).

### ***Stakeholders' Perspectives Towards Inclusion***

There are several stakeholders in the inclusion discussion, including the administration, teachers, students, and parents. Each stakeholders' perspective offers insight that can aid in the most effective implementation of inclusive practices in schools.

**Administrators' Views.** Principals and administrators are the gateway for inclusive practices in schools, and it has been shown that a principal's perspective on inclusion and its related practices is a significant influence on the regular and special educator's attitudes on inclusion, as well (Sigstad, 2017; Simola, 2016). Their values and perspectives, then, have the potential to be the driving force behind inclusion. School and district administration are tasked with articulating the roles and responsibilities of teachers in inclusive settings, and building upon a shared philosophy (DeVroey et al., 2016). They are accountable for developing a policy that outlines inclusive practices. DeVroey et al. (2016) found that such supportive leadership was a defining factor in effective inclusion models. McMaster (2015) examined the influence overall school culture has on the extent to which inclusion can be successful. As heads of school, administrators bring with them a set of values and beliefs that can positively impact inclusion

efforts in a program. School leaders' support of inclusive practices is translated to the mission of the school, and subsequent policy decisions made to serve students with disabilities (McMaster, 2015). Similar to the views stated in the 2002 USCCB statement (Boyle & Bernards, n.d.), McMaster (2015) purports that an inclusive culture is not just developed, but must be based on core assumptions and beliefs to be successful. This is echoed by DeVroey et al. (2016), who describes inclusion as most effective as a school-wide effort with full participation that aims to reduce the exclusion of any vulnerable learners, including students without disabilities.

**Teachers' Views.** Many practitioners hold an overall positive view of inclusion and agree that students with disabilities can progress with general education skills in general education classrooms (Olson et al., 2016). Although teachers see this as a possibility, many concerns have been addressed. A major consideration is the lack of specific teacher education in special education instructional approaches and strategies (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Koller et al., 2017; Malki & Einat, 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Topping et al., 2017; Weiss, Markowitz, & Kiel, 2018). Malki and Einat (2018) examined teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and results indicated that the majority of teachers felt that undergraduate coursework was insufficient in preparing them to assist students with disabilities. There are few higher education programs tailored to educators wishing to work with special needs students in faith-based schools (Lane, 2017). Educators question if modifications are successfully implemented in the majority of circumstances and many teachers agree that students are not typically included for enough hours in the day to make the inclusion effective (Young & Courtad, 2016). At the secondary level, critics of inclusion argue that classes are content specific and taught by experts in a subject area, and therefore, cannot be expected to include all learners (DeVroey et al., 2016). Another concern regarding inclusion at the secondary level is the quantity of reading required, which may present



a barrier to students with learning in content areas (Young & Courtad, 2016). Simola (2016) and Vaz et al. (2015) found that teachers were more likely to support inclusion if the students' needs were not severe. Teachers held a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with physical or sensory needs, than those with behavioral or intellectual challenges (Vaz et al., 2015). Teacher attitudes were influenced by gender and age, with older teachers and male teachers holding less favorable views of inclusion. This fact may also be attributed to lack of experience or knowledge in the area, which was also found to impact teachers' attitudes (Vaz et al., 2015). Teacher training and confidence levels were also positively correlated with favorable perspectives (Kirby, 2017; Vaz et al., 2015).

**Students' with Disabilities Views.** Students with disabilities have a unique perspective of inclusion and expressed desire for an active role in their education through self-advocacy (DeVroey et al., 2016). They see an excess of adult support as hindering their independence and are in favor of inclusive practices. In terms of peer support, students with disabilities overwhelmingly agree on the merit of such practices. Shogren et al. (2015) documented the perspectives of students with disabilities' attitudes, which resulted in three main themes. Students with disabilities, on the whole, felt that a sense of belonging to the larger school community, and a larger class with typical peers, is important to them (Shogren et al., 2015). Additionally, these students offered positive perspectives on the practices of co-teaching, collaboration, and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). Both students with and without disabilities articulated the benefits of teachers re-teaching material and learning in multiple ways (Nieto & Morina, 2019; Shogren et al., 2015). Students with disabilities respond positively to being motivated by educators, developing a sense of self-determination, and appreciating differentiation of instruction (Nieto & Morina, 2019).

Angus and Hughes (2017) found a positive correlation between peer-mentoring practices and perceptions of school climate, school connectedness, and academic achievement for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities also indicated viewing inclusion as the union of creating reciprocal relationships with peers, feeling supported in the classroom, and an attitude of acceptance from the school as a whole (Koller et al., 2017). In terms of socialization, the ability to foster meaningful friendships was found to be an integral part of the well-being of students with disabilities and diminishes the obstacles to inclusion on a broader level.

Ainscow and Messiou (2018) explored the impact student perspectives have on the worldwide discussion of inclusion and its related practices. In their view, students are the most critical of the stakeholders, and can either encourage or inhibit inclusion efforts. As previously stated, inclusion in the United States is often considered to be a placement decision, determining which class best fits a student's need. While student views can be contradictory at times, and ultimately, administrators and educators are accountable for making professional decisions, these insights can lead to new ideas and impact the global debate. Incorporating student views in the inclusion conversation not only impacts schools and programming decisions, but also helps promote belonging and competence of the student by allowing them to have their voice heard.

**Typically Developing Students' Views.** Typically developing students are reported as having varying perspectives towards inclusion. Some students held few expectations of inclusion, other than seeing students with disabilities in common areas, like the lunchroom, or in less academic settings (Koller et al., 2017). While students were willing to spend time with students with disabilities in school settings, they were less likely to spend time with these students outside of school (DeVroey, 2016). These students also articulated preferring the company of their neurotypical peers to that of students with special needs and stated they may

avoid students with physical disabilities (Edwards, 2019). These facts underscore the need for schools to provide more opportunities for exposure to students with disabilities. Typically developing students expressed having an understanding of a student's disability improved their views of inclusion, as it aided their knowledge of the student's abilities and helped them find common ground on which to build a relationship (Griffin et al., 2016). Two factors that influenced their interaction with special needs students were the student's communication level and positive reinforcement from the teachers (Carter et al., 2019). Griffin et al. (2016) found overwhelmingly positive perspectives of mentors in a study focused on college students in mentoring programs. Mentors expressed not only valuing the relationships formed through mentoring, but also articulated educational and career aspirations changing to include individuals with disabilities in some way.

Woodgate et al. (2019) studied the perceptions of typically developing peers and discovered they perceive some challenges, particularly in regard to the physical, communicative, and emotional regulation difficulties of students with disabilities. Nevertheless, and contrary to the studies above, Woodgate (2019) found that they enjoyed spending time with students with disabilities and valued their friendship. Neurotypical students reported using strategies to mitigate the challenges and articulated the benefits of disability awareness education. Topping et al. (2017) also suggested the importance of not only training peer mentors for specific roles, but also school-wide disability awareness training for the benefit of the school community, as a whole.

**Parents' Views.** Parents, as their child's first teachers and protectors, hold their own unique view on inclusive practices. Much of the legislation promoting education for all students, beginning with the UNESCO statement in 1975, was aided by parent advocacy (Falkmer et al.,

2019). In research by Falkmer et al. (2019), parents' perspectives of inclusion were explored. In regard to the use of paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities, parents expressed mixed sentiments. Parents were in favor of adult support in the classroom but were concerned that such support could inhibit peer relations and lead to social isolation. This problem of exclusion and potential bullying was a major concern, and parents felt that teachers and administration had a responsibility to ensure this was addressed. Administration was also expected to express commitment to inclusive practices, therefore setting the tone for the school (Falkmer et al., 2019). Overall, parents were less satisfied with inclusive placements in secondary education, particularly due to organizational challenges (Falkmer et al., 2019).

Paseka and Schwab (2020) investigated parents' views of inclusion on a global level and found the majority of the views were positive or neutral. Results indicated parents' views were contingent on three main factors: Parents' level of education, previous experience with individuals with disabilities, and the nature or severity of the disability (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Parents tended to hold a positive view of inclusion for those with physical or sensory disabilities, but not behavioral challenges. They voiced concerns that these students might require too much assistance, and typical student outcomes might be affected (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Parents who already had children with special educational needs had more positive views of inclusion overall. If parents' educational and income level was higher, their view on the inclusion of students with physical disabilities was more positive. Conversely, however, the parents with lower income and educational levels had a more positive view of including students with learning disabilities (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Parents were in favor of inclusive practices of differentiation, collaboration, and personalization, and agreed that utilizing these practices fostered effective inclusion programs (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). School culture, availability of

resources, and school-wide policies were also viewed as significant factors in successful inclusion programs. Kirby's (2017) research illuminated more undecided views towards inclusion, particularly in terms of their own child's participation.

### **Summary**

Educating students with disabilities has been, and continues to be, a well-researched topic in education. This literature review aimed to explore the research relating to special education instructional models at the secondary level and in Catholic schools. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Bronfenbrenner, 1994) was used to support the research, as it examines the impact student-environment interactions can have on a student's access to general education content and in general education settings. From the microsystem to the chronosystem, a student's parents, teachers, peers, school, community, and culture have an influence on the student's inclusion and well-being. Humberd and Rouse (2016) and Janssen et al. (2015) purport that high-quality, comprehensive inclusion models incorporating peer support interventions should strive to reach the relational type, as described in the relational mentoring theory. Inclusion has yet to be universally defined, but commonly conveys educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, in general education classes with general education content, when appropriate. Many agree that the most significant barriers to inclusion are attitudinal and cultural in nature (Herzer, 2016). Stakeholders' views have been shown to be integral in shaping the inclusion conversation, particularly those of students with disabilities themselves, who articulate the desire to be heard and accepted among their peers without disabilities (Shogren et al., 2015).

Several service-delivery models have been introduced as a means of improving educational and social outcomes for students with disabilities. The UDL framework

promotes flexible, purpose-driven, proactive instruction that uses multi-modal methods to deliver differentiated instruction. Co-teaching, in various arrangements, has been proven to have some positive benefits for delivering general education content, with the added advantage of providing opportunities to interact with peers. The preponderance of studies show that peer-support models are beneficial to students' academic, communication, and social skill development. Students with disabilities articulate positive attitudes towards inclusion, and specifically, peer-support programming.

Students with disabilities are educated in far fewer numbers in Christian or Catholic schools, and when students are accepted, often minimal interventions are available. Barriers to inclusion in these settings include financial constraints, lack of professional training and resources, and concerns for the reputation of the school. Faith-based schools should look to the mission of the institution to guide them in decision making in matters of inclusion. Administrators can set the tone for the inclusion of students with special educational needs and offer more comprehensive services that align with students' academic, social, emotional, and spiritual development.

## **CHAPTER THREE: PROPOSED METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girls, private school in Rhode Island that addresses the students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and to design a proposal of recommendations. The problem was the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for female students with disabilities in an all-girls school in Rhode Island. The design section of this chapter will identify the research design used in this applied study. This will be followed by the research questions, setting, and participants. The researcher's role, procedures, and data collection and analysis methods will be identified next. Finally, the ethical considerations and a summary will conclude the chapter.

### **Design**

The research design was a multimethod design, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A multimethod design was used, as it provides for maximum understanding of a problem by combining both forms of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A multimethod approach focuses more on the needs of the research and the given strengths of a particular method, that are then used in a complementary fashion (Halverson et al., 2017). In this study, as it is exploring the perceptions of teachers regarding inclusion programs, it was important to elucidate meaning through the use of more than one measure to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the findings. This is particularly true when investigating the subjective attitudes of participants, and the researcher hopes to approach the issue from multiple vantage points.

Three data collection approaches were utilized. As a qualitative method, teacher interviews were conducted. Next, a survey was given as a quantitative measure. Additionally, document analysis was used as a qualitative measure.

### **Research Questions**

**Central question:** How can the problem of lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 1:** How would teachers and administrators in an interview solve the problem of lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for girls in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 2:** How would teachers and administrators in surveys solve the problem of lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for girls in Rhode Island?

**Sub-question 3:** How would a document analysis be used to inform the problem of lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for girls in Rhode Island?

### **Setting**

The study took place in the high school of an all-girls, Catholic K-12 school in a suburb of a large city in Rhode Island, known as St. Teresa's Catholic School from this point forward. St. Teresa's is accredited by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), National Coalition of Girls, and National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). This site was chosen as it is the only all girls model in the state, and educates students from 52 cities and towns in Rhode Island and neighboring Massachusetts. The school is led by the President, Sister Rose Angelus, and the upper school is led by Ms. Suzanne Rodgers. The upper school, serving grades 9-12, had 330 pupils in the 2018-2019 academic year. There are currently no teachers designated as special educators on the faculty roster, but there are two staff



members noted as student support service providers and guidance counselors. The average class size is 18 and there is a 9:1 student-faculty ratio.

### **Participants**

As stakeholders, the teachers at St. Teresa's Catholic School were the sample pool from which the participants were drawn. The type of sampling used was purposive sampling, as the participants are all teachers at the school. This allowed the researcher to sample a group of people that can best inform about the issue being examined (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that involves selecting participants who are knowledgeable about a specific population and makes the most effective use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2015; Setia, 2016). Currently, there is one principal and 35 teachers on staff, ten of whom will be interviewed. Additionally, a survey was conducted and sent to 22 teachers, in a single-stage sampling procedure.

### **The Researcher's Role**

This study was conducted because of my interest in the field of special education and desire to see all students reach their highest potential. The researcher brings with her some assumptions to the study. As a mother of a child with an intellectual disability, and as a proponent of Catholic education, the researcher has an interest in the quality of services available to students in Catholic schools in Rhode Island at the secondary level. In an effort to maximize the reliability and credibility of the data, the researcher discloses this information to elucidate the values that shape her background, which ultimately impact the study's findings. The researcher has had no prior knowledge of the services and/or programs offered at St. Teresa's Catholic School but has had a relationship with other area Catholic schools. Of particular note, it is the researcher's responsibility to protect the rights of the participants in regard to anonymity,

confidentiality, and informed consent during data collection and data analysis. The researcher's role will entail conducting the interviews, reviewing the records and documents, and overseeing the administration of the survey.

### **Procedures**

Permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained (see Appendix A for IRB approval). Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the president of the school and upper school principal (see Appendix B for permission request letter and permissions) and IRB approval was granted. In addition to IRB approval, approval from the research site was obtained. Participants for the research study were recruited through St. Teresa's Catholic School on a voluntary basis; each participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C for Informed consent letter), which indicates the purpose of the study and explains their rights as voluntary participants. The data was gathered through the three aforementioned methods: Interviews, a survey, and document analysis. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the survey was distributed to the participants. Completed surveys were collected in a password protected file.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This applied study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including interviews, a survey, and document analysis. Using this combination of methods allowed the researcher to merge their presumptions and formulate interpretations based on both approaches, benefitting from each method's respective strengths (Watkins & Gioia, 2015; Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). Creswell and Clark (2017) described mixed-methods research as an accessible and varied way of providing a breadth and depth of understanding of a phenomenon. In this study, the research question examined the lack of comprehensive special education programs for

girls in Catholic high schools in Rhode Island. Through interviews and survey responses, the researcher obtained multiple perspectives of the stakeholders, supported by documented evidence. Multiple data sources were used to achieve triangulation, which adds to the validity of the overall research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data collected was coded and themed, and any non-responses, responses, and missing data was reported. These processes are additional methods that are useful in increasing the validity of the study.

### **Interviews**

The first sub-question for this study explored how administrators and educators in an interview would solve the problem of lack of special education programs in a private all-girls secondary school in Rhode Island. A qualitative interview involves the researcher asking less structured and more open-ended questions that are intended to elicit the perspectives of the subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this case, interviews were useful tools by allowing the researcher to direct the line of questioning to obtain the relevant data.

The semi-structured interview, containing 13 questions, was administered over the phone. Interview subjects, educators, and administrators at St. Teresa's Catholic School had previously been given and signed a copy of informed consent. The researcher introduced herself, explained the purpose of the study, and described the general structure of the interview. The opening question was designed to make the subject comfortable, and subsequent questions asked for their perceptions of the central issue being explored. The interview sessions were audio recorded and the researcher simultaneously took notes. The following 13 questions were asked:

1. *How would you describe your past teaching experience?*

This question was designed as an introductory question to make the interviewees feel comfortable speaking about themselves, which will lay the foundation for the teachers to

express their opinions on the topic. The researcher will gain insight into the level of experience held by the teachers, which may or may not impact their beliefs on specific educational practices. Rodden et al. (2019) and Su et al. (2019) assert that inclusion is most effective when teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive practices and these attitudes are based on one's experience.

2. *What is your current role in the school?*

As an educator's role can impact their attitudes towards inclusion (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2015), this question aimed to discover in what capacity the participant is currently functioning at the school.

3. *In your opinion, what are the main goals of a high-school education?*

This question sought to discover what the teacher perceives as integral in educational goals. High school prepares students for life outside of school, which does not only include academic goals, but also social and emotional skills they will need to navigate the world (Petrova, 2018).

4. To what extent do you feel Catholic schools have a moral obligation to educate students with disabilities?

Burke and Griffin (2016) argued that Catholic schools should follow the guidance of Catholic Social Teaching, which supports the dignity of people with disabilities. Rayner (2018) concurred that an inclusive education is aligned with a biblical perspective of respecting learning differences.

5. *What, if any, experience do you have with students with special needs?*

This question aimed to discover the level of experience the teachers have had with students of varying abilities but does not limit this to only a classroom setting. Teachers

bring with them life experiences that impact their view of children and special educational practices. The question was written to omit “educational” in “students with special needs” to allow the respondents to consider the outside experiences that may have occurred in non-school settings. Teacher attitudes and experiences have a direct correlation in the quality of inclusive services (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2015).

6. *What does inclusion in an educational setting mean to you?*

Teachers’ personal beliefs on how inclusion occurs in a general sense in schools and classrooms is important. As the practical use of inclusion has evolved over the years, and definitions vary, it is important to understand the teachers’ perspectives of how inclusion is to be defined. Inclusion and related terms such as “typical,” “disabilities,” “difference,” and “general versus special education” have been part of the lexicon when discussing how we are to educate those with special educational needs (Borosan, 2017). This question allows the interviewee to elucidate their view of inclusion and describe it in their terms.

7. *What specific inclusive practices are utilized at this school?*

Strategies such as co-teaching and peer mentoring are examples of interventions that have many benefits in inclusive settings (Carter et al., 2015; DeMartino & Specht, 2018; Huber et al., 2018; Simplican, 2015). Therefore, this question was a follow-up to the preceding question, as it asked for more in-depth information of the teachers’ perceptions of a specific program and its practices.

8. *Which resources would you like to see included to support students with special educational needs in this school?*

This question provided the interviewee an opportunity to discuss particular resources prior to the questions about peer support. This not only allowed the subjects to speak candidly about their perceptions, but also provided a springboard to mention other resources, to which the researcher asked follow-up questions. Other interventions found in inclusive programs include RTI (response to intervention), growth planning, and PBIS (positive behavioral interventions and supports). Back et al. (2016) also promoted a change in mindset that purports that all students belong to all teachers, and eliminates the labels of “inclusion” versus “regular” students.

9. *What professional development or educational training have you had to address teaching students with special needs?*

Lane (2017) explained that educators in Catholic schools expressed lack of training as an obstacle to undertaking inclusion models in these schools. This question aimed to discover if teachers’ prior training in special education has an effect on their perceptions of inclusion.

10. *How would you describe the effectiveness of peer relationships for students with special needs?*

This question aimed to assess the teachers’ perceptions of the importance of peer relationships. Understanding the value of peer relationships is important in special education programming, since peers naturally affect each other’s behaviors and are able to be present in many settings throughout a day (Petrova, 2018). Additionally, both typical peers and students with special educational needs can benefit from a peer support model. Logsdon et al.’s (2018) research indicated peer relationships strengthen friendships and communication skills, and can increase academic engagement.

*11. In what ways can peers serve as supports to other students in and out of the classroom?*

Petrova (2018) defined peer support as “an intervention that involves one or more classmates without disabilities and provides academic and/or social support to a student with a disability” (p. 409). This question aimed to ascertain what the teachers deem as peer support.

*12. What challenges, if any, might occur when incorporating a peer support component within the context of inclusion?*

This question was meant to allow the teachers to articulate their perceived concerns of implementing a peer-support model. Carter et al. (2015) discussed the many benefits of peer-supported learning. Any challenges in logistics of classroom scheduling, or more broadly, in terms of complex adolescent interactions, can be remediated through support of paraprofessionals and teachers.

*13. How would you solve the problem of the lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls at St. Teresa’s School?*

Since some subjects may not feel comfortable veering away from a question, this question allows the interviewee the opportunity to articulate any feelings towards the subject that they may want to share. This allowed educators a chance to mention any other thoughts they deem relevant to the conversation. In addition, made the subject feel valued through the process.

Interview data was analyzed via reading and coding to generate categories. The codes were reduced to themes, which is the researcher’s way of making sense of the data, through the context of their own interpretation. The data were analyzed through a cross-case synthesis and triangulated so the researcher could identify similarities and

differences among the cases or interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Depoy & Gitlin, 2020). The resulting themes will then be represented in text and table form.

## Survey

The next sub-question for this study explored how quantitative data derived from surveys would solve the problem of lack of special education programs in a private secondary school for girls in Rhode Island. A survey to obtain closed-ended responses based on the literature, using a Likert scale, was administered to the teachers and administration at the target school. The surveys were administered via Survey Monkey to individuals who agreed to participate. This method of data collection is preferred, as it is inexpensive, easy to use, and can be completed in a timely manner (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). The survey contained the following 14 items:

1. I support inclusive practices in my current role in this school.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item was intended to discover how the teachers view the practice of inclusion. Although many teachers are not given explicit special education instruction while earning their degrees, they may be playing a large role in educating students with special educational needs (Mader, 2017). Some teachers feel ill-prepared to do this, while others embrace the challenge. This item was meant to identify the subject's particular view.

2. Inclusion is only effective with the assistance of paraprofessionals in the classroom.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree



Peer support has been shown to be more effective than paraprofessional support in increasing engagement (Howell, 2017). This item sought to identify the teachers' perceptions of how inclusion can be specifically achieved in the classroom, with or without the support of paraprofessionals.

3. Inclusion creates more work for the teachers.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The purpose of this item was to reveal teachers' attitudes toward the practical application of inclusion in schools. A variety of opinions exist regarding inclusion and these can be impacted by several factors, including self-efficacy and targeted training (Vaz et al., 2015).

4. Peer mentoring is an effective strategy in addressing the academic goals of students with special educational needs.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. Peer mentoring is an effective strategy in addressing the social/emotional goals of students with special educational needs.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item was designed to identify the teachers' belief that peer mentoring can be an effective intervention in social-emotional contexts. Puckett, Mathur, and Zamora (2017) address the value peers can have in modeling social skills and improving communication in a natural setting, as

opposed to explicit social coaching. The skills gained can then be generalized outside of the educational setting. Peer networks can have a significant impact on students' behaviors, raise production and effort levels, and increase educational achievement (Berthelon et al., 2017).

6. The benefits of inclusion outweigh the costs.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

While there may be costs associated with employing special education teachers and paraprofessionals in some inclusion models, there are other models, such as peer mentoring, in which the infrastructure is already in place and schools would require no additional funding. The cost of inclusiveness can best be seen as a cost-benefit analysis, in which the improved outcomes for all students and decreased discrimination outweigh the fiscal impact (Dispelling the myths of inclusive education, 2015). This item aimed to discover what the teacher views as the value of inclusion.

7. Co-teaching is an effective strategy in addressing educational goals of students with special educational needs.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item was intended to identify the teachers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of co-teaching. Stein (2017) and Akcamete and Gokbulut (2018) explored the strategy of co-teaching and found it to be a flexible strategy that can be utilized in many formats, and one in which the strengths of two teachers are highlighted.

8. Students with disabilities have the right to receive a Catholic education.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The objective of this item was to discover if educators believe it is the moral responsibility of Catholic schools to educate students with disabilities. Scripture tells us in Matthew 25:40, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’”(NIV). Therefore, all children must be afforded the right to be educated in their faith.

9. I would be willing to collaborate with teachers to expand my inclusive practices, if doing so made Catholic education accessible to more students.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item sought to identify teachers’ views on the importance of Catholic education for all students. Some effects of a Catholic education are increased self-esteem and attitude toward school (Village & Francis, 2016).

10. A specific peer-mentoring element is not needed to make a classroom inclusive.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item was intended to identify how teachers feel about the range of interventions available in creating comprehensive programs. Special needs students who are provided access to the general education curriculum have shown increased academic success. Merely sharing a classroom may not be sufficient in meeting these students' feelings of belonging and acceptance, however (Stiefel et al., 2018).

11. Inclusive practices have the ability to add value to all students' educational experiences, including those without special needs.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Evins (2015) discovered that while there may be challenges associated with inclusion, it can foster a climate of tolerance, diversity, and responsibility in the classroom, and among both students with special needs and their typical peers. This item was designed to measure teachers' attitudes towards the impact inclusion may have on non-disabled students.

12. Social-emotional development is as important as academic progress in secondary schools.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

This item aimed to discover teachers' perceptions of the importance of social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning has been shown to aid students in achieving successful school outcomes (Glennie et. al, 2017). Social competencies in the areas of self-regulation, reflection, and relationship skills can be linked to students' success in school.

13. I feel my training has prepared me to work effectively as a teacher in an inclusive classroom.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Because research indicates educators in Catholic schools are more inclined to view inclusion positively when they have prior training in special education practices (Lane, 2017), this item sought to discover the level of self-efficacy teachers hold as a result of prior training.

14. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an effective approach to inclusion that I would consider utilizing.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

UDL has the capacity to provide inclusionary options for students with disabilities in general education classrooms and is grounded in differentiation and flexibility of instruction (Rao et al., 2017).

Survey data was analyzed by cross tabulating the results by variables, such as gender, education level, years of teaching, and experience in special education. A pivot table was created to interpret the responses, which according to Sue and Griffin (2016), is a useful tool from which to explore and analyze the data.

### **Document Analysis**

The third sub-question explored how a document analysis would inform the problem of a lack of special education programs in a private secondary school for girls in Rhode Island. Supporting documents in this study examined the school's history of accepting students with special needs, ascertain how many students have IEPs and how they are being implemented, and investigate the curriculum to explore what features are currently in place to support students with disabilities. An advantage of using this type of data collection is the convenience of accessing the documents while remaining unobtrusive in the research setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Bowen (2009), "Documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate" (p. 29). Using document analysis is an efficient way to obtain preexisting answers to the researcher's questions (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). Not only does an analysis of documents provide a source of background information, it also can serve as the foundation for

subsequent questioning in the study. Documents included public records, policies, curriculum handbooks, and testimonials. Document data was analyzed by coding the documents and creating a worksheet to organize the information. The use of a worksheet allows for more efficient and purposeful organization of the gathered material (Frey, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In a research study, the protection of the participants and overall research endeavor are of maximum importance. The researcher disclosed the purpose of the study and describe its motives without leading the participants towards any preconceived hypotheses (Depoy & Gitlin, 2020). For this study, the site and all participants' identifying information was anonymized through the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Individuals' participation was voluntary and non-coercive; participants were able to refuse questions or withdraw from the study at any time. All data were kept secure; electronic data were protected through the use of passwords, and paper data were stored in a locked file. The researcher gathered the necessary permissions and during data collection, provided minimal disruption to the research site. When analyzing the data, the researcher shared all of the findings accurately, taking into account the many perspectives offered. Since the researcher is the mother of a child with special needs, she brings with her a bias on the issue of inclusion and educational programming. Reflexivity in qualitative research, the practice of the examining one's relationship to the research process, improves reliability and credibility of the data (Jootun & McGhee, 2009). According to Dodgson (2019) and Creswell & Creswell (2018) indicate that reflexivity is a reciprocal relationship between the researcher's life experiences and values and the research itself. The study findings, then, are shaped by the researcher's background (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girls, private school in Rhode Island. In doing so, it addressed the students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and design a proposal of recommendations. The problem is the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for female students with disabilities in an all-girls school in Rhode Island. Through an applied research design, the researcher used interviews, a survey, and document analysis to collect data. Participants were teachers and administrators from St. Teresa's Catholic School. The researcher obtained IRB approval, anonymized the data, and maintained confidentiality. After coding, themes emerged, and the researcher presented the findings to demonstrate how educators view an inclusion model that incorporates a peer -mentoring component to fully address the educational requirements of students with special educational needs.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This applied study addressed the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for students with disabilities in a Catholic all-girls school in Rhode Island. The purpose was to solve the problem of the lack of comprehensive, inclusive special education programming at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island and to formulate a solution to address the problem. The central research question explored in this study was thus: How can the problem of lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island? The three sub-questions were as follows: Based on interviews, how can teachers and administrators solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island? Based on survey responses, how would teachers and administrators solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island? and How can a document analysis be used to inform the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island? This chapter will describe the research participants and present the results of interviews, surveys, and document analysis.

### **Participants**

This study drew upon input from participants from a Catholic high school for girls, St. Teresa's, located in a middle-class area of Rhode Island. St. Teresa's school serves 404 students from grades PreK to 12, who come from 49 towns and two states. Among the student body, over half identified as participating in the Catholic religion. Participants included 53 teachers who were initially surveyed, 15 of whom completed the survey. Five of these subjects, three females and two males, participated in a semi-structured interview.



### **Interview Participants**

Teacher 1 has been teaching at St. Teresa's School for 22 years. She is a religious Sister, a campus minister, and a theology teacher. Teacher 2 has taught Spanish for twenty years, but this is her first year teaching at St. Teresa's. Teacher 3 is a female teacher who teaches physical education and serves as a department chair. She has thirteen years' experience teaching high school and seven years' experience at the elementary and middle levels. Teacher 4 is a male science teacher in the upper school. He has been teaching for 18 years and was in the military for thirty years prior to teaching. Teacher 5 is a male teacher who has been teaching history in grades 9-11 for 15 years.

### **Survey Participants**

Using purposeful sampling, the survey was sent to 53 teachers and administrators of St. Teresa's Catholic High School. A survey link to a Survey Monkey survey was sent using a listserv provided by the Head of School. Fifteen responses were gathered after the original recruitment email and two follow-up emails were sent. All survey participants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree, as required to be a teacher at St. Teresa's school. The participants were all Caucasian, as no other ethnicity was represented in the school faculty. Pseudonyms were not required, as the surveys were anonymous.

### **Results**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators from St. Teresa's Catholic High School to gather perspectives related to inclusion at the secondary level. Five main themes emerged because of this qualitative analysis. Next, an anonymous online survey was conducted with teachers and administrators to evaluate attitudes towards inclusion and was used to support the themes that emerged from the interviews. Finally, a

document review was conducted to inform and corroborate the findings and aid in the convergence of all research methods.

### Sub-question 1

Sub-question 1 of the study was “How would teachers and administrators solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island, as determined through an interview?” In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted by phone and audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed using the Otter.ai transcription service. Five themes emerged as a result of the interview analysis. Table 1 illustrates the themes generated in the interviews, and the participant quotes were collected.

Table 1. *Themes and related quotes*

Interview Themes	Exemplary Quotes
<i>Inclusion is good in theory, but is not feasible in reality</i>	<p>“It just won’t work here.”</p> <p>“We have to face the fact that we do not have the facilities for special-needs students.”</p> <p>“I don’t think the program fits a special-needs child.”</p> <p>“As human beings, we probably have an obligation to try to include everyone that we can.”</p> <p>“It’s the finances; they have to rely on tuition.”</p> <p>“Inclusion would be beneficial, but the route they want here is college prep.”</p> <p>“It would be beyond the ability of our school to do.”</p> <p>“We don’t do special education.”</p> <p>“Inclusion means we have to find a way for each student to be able to do a certain task, and even modify something or change it.”</p> <p>“I think it’s personally unreasonable to think that, within four walls of one course of curriculum, you can expect to have</p>

	students from every part of the spectrum.... You don't want to lower the bar across the entire spectrum.”
<p><i>Peer mentoring as an inclusion strategy</i></p> <p>Subtheme 1: Peer mentoring can be a mutually beneficial arrangement</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Challenges to peer mentoring can present obstacles</p>	<p>“Peer relationships can be the best thing that has happened to both parties.”</p> <p>“It (peer mentoring) can be more important to the other person (mentor).”</p> <p>“Our students are very aware of the needs of others.”</p> <p>“They (peer mentors) want to do it; they're willing to share their knowledge. They do it, you know, as a way of serving another student.”</p> <p>“There is a rapport that is built not only with the individual peer mentors, but the whole school community is enhanced.”</p> <p>“If a child has some behavior problems, the student will have to get assistance to get the situation taken care of by the teacher.”</p> <p>“Some mentors might have to be coached up on how they can help.”</p> <p>“The peer has to buy into it, and perhaps a bigger challenge is that the parents have to buy into it.”</p> <p>“It (peer mentoring) would slow or inhibit that student's ability to focus on his or her own grades and successes and achievement in the classroom.”</p> <p>“If there was a behavioral problem with the (special needs) student, can the peer manage that?”</p>
<p><i>Lack of teacher training and experience with students with special needs</i></p>	<p>“You have to have proper mentoring and training.”</p> <p>“Teachers need a better explanation by the school to describe a student's disability and how a teacher who is not a special education teacher be able to best help them in an inclusion environment.”</p> <p>“I see challenges as far as teachers being qualified. I don't think there's enough proper training.”</p>

<p><i>Catholic school identity and inclusion</i></p>	<p>“The Catholic faith is, hopefully, all inclusive.”</p> <p>“I think they (Catholic schools) have a moral obligation but also believe they have to have adequate facilities.”</p> <p>“Catholic schools should educate students with disabilities, but we don’t do special education. We do have students with IEPs – we cater to them.”</p> <p>“Catholic schools are not just for ‘smart’ kids, they are for all students who need to become educated, no matter what their aptitude.”</p>
<p><i>Supportive Leadership</i></p>	<p>“I don’t think that inclusion is the direction the leadership is trying to go in.”</p> <p>“The school has different functions, and the school leaders are supportive of those.”</p>

### ***Theme 1***

The concept of inclusion was regarded by the teachers as a worthwhile practice, but the majority of the participants expressed concern about the obstacles to inclusion in their particular program. Teacher 1 stated, “I don’t think our program fits a special needs child.” This sentiment was echoed by Teacher 4, who said, “It would be beyond the ability of our school.” Teacher 3 noted, “We don’t do special education” and “We don’t have the money.” Similarly, Teacher 1 mentioned finances as an impediment to the implementing inclusive practices.

### ***Theme 2***

Peer mentoring as a specific component of inclusion models was discussed by the interview participants. This theme was further divided into two sub-themes, which expressed the respondents’ overall attitude towards peer mentoring and the particular concerns that could be associated with the use of this model. All interview subjects articulated the benefits of peer

mentoring. Teacher 3 stated that “Peers can definitely have a positive impact,” and Teacher 4 said, “I think it’s as beneficial to that peer as it is to the student with disabilities.” Further supporting the idea of peer mentorship, Teacher 5 said, “Peer relationships can be the best thing that has happened to both parties involved.”

The participants also voiced their views regarding the drawbacks of inclusion. Teacher 1 stated that her concern with special education model was in regard to behavior problems and the peer relationship being monitored by a teacher representative, which would lead to more responsibility for the teacher. Teacher 3 also voiced concerns about a mentor’s ability to manage the behavior of another student, which might place undue hardship on that mentor. The concern presented by Teacher 2 was that “The facility itself would have to make accommodations to undertake a project like that” and also referenced the necessary teacher qualifications and training to oversee a mentoring model. Teacher 4 explained that a student mentor might face the need to sacrifice his own grades and achievement at the expense of the mentoring arrangement. He also expressed that the parents of mentors could be reluctant to permit the relationship, as it could introduce a distraction within the mentors’ own educational experience.

### ***Theme 3***

All of the teachers interviewed reported having no prior experience working with students with special needs. In addition, none could recall any professional development or staff training related to inclusion. One teacher had completed a minor in special education more than 20 years previous but stated that she had not applied that knowledge since. Many teachers mentioned a lack of experience and training as barriers to the implementation of special education programs. Teacher 5 said that teachers need “better explanation from the school to describe a student’s disability and how a teacher who is not a special education teacher can best

help them.” Teacher 2 stated, “there’s not enough proper training,” and Teacher 1 said, “Some teachers think they don’t have the capabilities to do a good job for that student.”

#### ***Theme 4***

Since the teachers interviewed are employed at a Catholic school, they were asked about a Catholic school’s obligation to educate students with disabilities. For instance, Teacher 5 stated that “Catholic schools are for all students who need to be educated, no matter what their aptitude.” All teachers expressed that a Catholic school should be inclusive, but many qualified their responses with concerns about how one might logistically implement such practices. Teacher 3, for example, stated, “I think Catholic schools have a moral obligation to educate students with special needs, but we don’t do special education. I mean, I think that they should, but that’s not what they do, and everyone that goes there knows that.” Teacher 3 concurred that Catholic schools are morally obligated to provide special education but expressed that “you have to have adequate facilities in order to do that, the proper mentorship, the proper teachers, and a facility where it can be accommodated.”

#### ***Theme 5***

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed subjects to offer opinions on questions not implicitly asked. Some teachers suggested that inclusion was not a choice for their school based on the priorities of the school leadership. This was evidenced in the statements from Teacher 3 and Teacher 2, who respectively declared that “I don’t think that inclusion is the direction the leadership is trying to go in,” and “The school has different functions, and the school leaders are supportive of those,” indicating that the school was already occupied with its own activities and strategic direction.

#### **Sub-Question 2**

Sub-question 2 of the study was, “How would teachers and administrators in surveys solve the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls in Rhode Island?” A Survey Monkey survey link (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DFHYFD8>) was emailed to potential participants, and 15 responses were collected. A Likert scale was used, with 5 indicating “strongly agree” and 1 being “strongly disagree.” Table 2 indicates the mean and standard deviation for each survey question. Twelve of the thirteen items had a standard deviation lower than 1.

Table 2. Survey Mean and Standard Deviation

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	4.06	0.96
2	3.2	1.08
3	3.8	0.86
4	3.86	0.99
5	4.13	0.74
6	3.8	0.67
7	4.2	0.77
8	4.8	0.41
9	4.2	0.67
10	3.2	0.86
11	4.46	0.51
12	4.6	0.5
13	3	1.25
14	3.46	0.63

Scores ranged from 4.46 on item 12, “Social-emotional development is as important as academic progress in secondary schools,” to 3 on item 13, “I feel my training has prepared me to work effectively as a teacher in an inclusive classroom.” The average Likert score on the 14-item survey was 3.91.

### Sub-Question 3

The third sub-question of the study was, “How would a document analysis be used to inform the problem of lack of special education programs in private secondary schools for girls

in Rhode Island?” Documents collected from the existing Options models helped identify program characteristics that support inclusive practices in a Catholic school environment. Specific documents included Options programs mission statements, which revealed the tenets of the programs based on the Catholic principles and the belief that the Options programs support the greater school community. Other documents included testimonials published by Options students and mentors who provided first-hand accounts of these stakeholders’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of the inclusive program they experienced. Specifically, these accounts referenced peer mentoring as advantageous to both parties and did not note any obstacles associated with peer mentoring. Additional publicly available documents were also analyzed that further informed the researcher’s findings. These included the school website and newspaper articles that present details of the Options programs and the populations they serve.

### **Discussion**

The research questions were designed to reveal the attitudes toward and perceptions of inclusive models in a Catholic secondary school for girls. The following section discusses how survey data, interview responses, and document analysis collectively support established empirical and theoretical research on the teacher attitudes toward and concerns with the practice of inclusion.

### **Empirical Literature**

In analyzing the results and investigating the data associated with the research questions, five major themes emerged. In addressing teacher perspectives, the following were discussed: teachers’ general attitudes towards inclusion, the importance of teacher training, peer mentoring as an inclusion strategy, the role Catholic identity plays in the implementation of an inclusion program, and the impact of supportive leadership on inclusion efforts.



### ***Overall Attitude Towards Inclusion***

Respondents in this study expressed that inclusion is a worthwhile endeavor but is only feasible under specific circumstances. The research subjects did not define inclusion using the same terms. This corroborates the bulk of the literature that demonstrates that there is no universal definition of the term, and moreover, the manner of implementation varies as widely as the definitions (Kauffman et al., 2018; Krischler et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017). Written testimonies from peer mentors describe inclusion not as helping students to conform to the rest of the school but as efforts to empower them to be part of it. In a broad sense, teachers agreed with the notion that inclusion is in the best interests of students. The literature confirms this supposition, as Horne and Timmons (2009) found that teachers agree that children must be educated in accordance with the students' best interests. Teachers in the study, however, were clear in their concerns about implementing inclusion in their existing program. Several barriers to inclusion were discussed, including financial burdens, teacher training, changes in classroom dynamics, and effects on the school's reputation. This idea aligns with the previous literature, which found that many teachers, while committed to inclusion in theory, are not confident in its practical implementation (Roberts and Simpson, 2016). The results of the current study are significant in demonstrating that less favorable attitudes towards inclusion ultimately impact the effectiveness of inclusionary practices (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Koller et al., 2017; Malki & Einat, 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Topping et al., 2017; Weiss, Markowitz, & Kiel, 2018).

### ***Teacher Training***

An overwhelming majority of the teachers in this study cited a lack of teacher training and education in the area of special education as a barrier to implementing inclusion. Lack of training seems to correlate with a lack of confidence, both of which lead to less-favorable

perspectives toward inclusion (Kirby, 2017; Vaz et al., 2015). Horne and Timmons (2009) revealed the sentiment among teachers that training in special education and inclusive practices were necessary for a variety of reasons, including self-confidence and to best serve the special needs population. Manrique et al. (2019) also indicated that teachers feel unprepared for the task of inclusion as a result of little or no initial or further training in the teaching of students with special educational needs. Previous studies have found that teacher education programs lack training in special education instructional approaches (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Koller et al., 2017; Malki & Einat, 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Topping et al., 2017; Weiss, Markowitz, & Kiel, 2018). Malki and Einat (2018) also found that teachers cite undergraduate coursework as insufficient in preparing them to work in inclusive environments. To address the lack of training, Topping et al. (2017) suggests school-wide disability training and a mentor for the school leadership.

### ***Peer Mentoring***

Inclusion models with a peer mentoring component, although few, have shown to provide benefits to peers and students with disabilities alike. All of the teachers in this study articulated the thought that peer mentoring is a worthwhile, advantageous practice for both parties. This is consistent with the extant research that revealed a benefit for both typically developing students and those with special educational needs through a peer mentoring arrangement (Ward et al., 2020). It should be noted that teachers felt that the challenges that could arise as a result of such arrangements center on two issues: the overwhelming logistics of monitoring the peer relationship and the possibility of behavioral problems from the student with disabilities. Paseka and Schwab (2020) found that parents of students without disabilities felt similarly. Although parents' attitudes were not measured in the current study, the shared concern among stakeholders

is worth consideration. Testimonials from mentors and Options students, however, did not corroborate these perceptions. In fact, both Options students and mentors articulated that their experiences in the Options program was life-changing and the most valuable experience of their life thus far. There were no teachers that disputed the merits of peer mentoring. Although the survey data indicated agreement among teachers that social gains can be achieved as a result of mentoring, they are less inclined to attribute academic gains to a peer support program.

### ***Catholic Identity***

Both the survey results and interview responses affirmed the educators' beliefs that students with disabilities are entitled to a Catholic education and that Catholic schools are morally obligated to provide such an education. These beliefs are indicated by responses to survey question 4 and from a corresponding interview question. Although the educators felt that students should be afforded this opportunity, they were less inclined to commit to the practical implementation of inclusion in Catholic schools. Educator responses elucidated trepidation regarding the cost-benefit ratio of inclusion and the amount of effort perceived to implement inclusion. A Catholic school's mission, according to Boyle and Bernards (n.d.), should be the driving force behind the decision to educate students with disabilities (Bachrach, 2016; Schmidt, 2017). This view aligns with the National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA) stance that part of a school's mission should be "to affirm the dignity of all students and educate a diverse student body" (Crowley & Wall, 2007). Additionally, Catholic social teaching promotes the respect of all human persons and calls on the faithful to embrace the participation of individuals with disabilities in community and educational endeavors (USCCB, 1998). Bishop Emeritus Paul S. Loverde said the following in 2010: "It is through faith, the power of faith, that we see persons with disabilities, not as a disability to cope with, but as a gift to be with, to

treasure, and to love.” This statement conveys the Catholic identity that supports the mission of inclusion in Catholic schools.

### ***Supportive Leadership***

Horne and Timmons (2009) found that, for a school to effectively implement inclusion, the support of the leadership was crucial. This support takes the form of planning and collaboration time, special education training, and in-classroom assistance. Subjects in this study all reference the significance of school leadership in leading the charge for inclusion. In fact, some teachers indicated that leadership had an alternate vision for the school culture, pointing away from inclusion, which represented a clear obstacle. As evidenced by prior research, an inclusive culture is often dependent on the attitudes of the principal and school leadership (Schmidt, 2017; Sigstad, 2017; Simola, 2016). McMaster (2015) explored principals’ attitudes towards inclusion and found that the values and beliefs of the administration had a crucial impact on the decision making and policy changes that would facilitate inclusion. The documents reviewed from inclusive Catholic schools pointed to the use of an Individual Catholic Education Plan (ICEP), which is universally recognized as a tool for differentiating instruction for the purpose of inclusion in Catholic schools. To effectively implement Catholic inclusion, school leadership must embrace the ICEP and the underlying belief that all students’ unique strengths and needs are valued. An ICEP clearly defines the shared responsibility of the stakeholders in the creation of an inclusionary environment.

### **Theoretical Literature**

This research also confirmed the theoretical literature on to inclusion and peer mentoring. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (EST) suggests that an individual, in this case a student, is impacted by the interactions within many environments. Within the microsystem of

the school, an Options student will interact with her peers. The mesosystem refers to the connections between settings, like home and school. The research data suggests that parental influence on both the Options student and the mentor can profoundly affect the creation of successful peer mentoring relationships. The exosystem can include the school system or Diocese that affects programming and, indirectly, the student. The macrosystem takes into account the religious nature of the school. Results from this study elucidate that the school's Catholic identity plays a significant role in the acceptance of and desire to implement an inclusive Options program.

Relational mentoring theory was used as a framework for exploring peer mentoring as an inclusive strategy. Ragins and Verbos (2007) describe the benefits to both members of a mentoring relationship as a need-based fit. This means that the peer arrangement can meet the personal, developmental, or career needs of the involved individuals. This mutually interdependent connection is evidenced in the testimonials of Options participants who express personal satisfaction with the peer mentoring program.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, "How can the problem of lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa's Catholic School in Rhode Island?" Fifteen teachers were surveyed to provide perspectives to answer sub-question 1, "Based on interviews, how can teachers and administrators solve the problem of lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for girls in Rhode Island, determined through an interview?" Five of these teachers were then interviewed to answer sub-question 2, "Based on survey responses, how can teachers and administrators solve the problem of the lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for Girls in Rhode Island?" to ascertain their

specific attitudes towards inclusion and peer mentoring in Catholic schools. Several themes emerged because of both the quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data, including teachers' overall attitudes toward inclusion, need for teacher training, peer mentoring as an inclusion strategy, supportive leadership, and Catholic identity. Lastly, data from documents and archival records provided insights to answer sub-question 3: "How can a document analysis be used to inform the problem of lack of special education programs at St. Teresa's Catholic School for Girls in Rhode Island?" The findings from these three data sources are discussed as framed by the literature and theoretical frameworks in further detail in Chapter Five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girl, private school in Rhode Island. The problem explored in this study was the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for female students with disabilities in a Catholic all-girls school in Rhode Island. This chapter details the proposed solutions to the problem, including an identification of the resources and funds required to implement these solutions. Additional information delineated in this chapter includes the timeline for problem resolution, the possible implications of the solution, and an explanation of how the solution will be evaluated.

### **Restatement of the Problem**

The problem presented is the lack of comprehensive secondary education programs for female students with disabilities in a Catholic all-girl school in Rhode Island. Currently, there is no special education model at this school, which presents a gap in educational programming. The absence of such a program leaves the academic, social, and spiritual needs of many students with special needs unserved. This study used a multi-method approach to collect data regarding teachers' perspectives towards inclusion models and peer mentoring. First, quantitative data were collected by a survey of fifteen teachers at St. Teresa's School. Qualitative methods included five semi-structured interviews, which allowed teachers to share their attitudes about special education programs in Catholic schools and inclusion in general. Finally, document analysis also contributed data on the existing special education model at an all-boys Catholic school. These three methods were used together to provide information and inform the researcher of the

solution to the problem of the lack of special education programs.

### **Proposed Solution to the Central Question**

The central research question is “How can the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programs for girls be solved at St. Teresa’s Catholic School in Rhode Island?” The question was answered through analysis of the data and examination of the themes that emerged. From the triangulation of the data, two solutions to the problem were identified. First, the creation of an Options program for girls at St. Teresa’s School could fill the void in Catholic programming for students with disabilities in Rhode Island. Secondly, a Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) in the Northeast could be created to serve as an advocacy organization to facilitate inclusive opportunities at Catholic schools.

### **Resources Needed**

As demonstrated by the literature and data, effective leadership is paramount to the success of an Options program. The school president must set the tone for inclusivity at St. Teresa’s school, which then will encourage the head of the upper school and teachers to adopt an inclusive mindset. Professional development is necessary at all levels prior to implementation, as are ongoing building level meetings to discuss logistical requirements. Sacred Heart Academy, an existing Options model, can serve as a resource and mentor to St. Teresa’s school. Bhroina and King (2019) emphasized the importance of professional development on teacher efficacy, knowledge and skill development, and student outcomes. Models that “involve active and inquiry-based learning, that are collaborative, are of high professional relevance to all group members, and are embedded in the contexts of teachers’ work” (p. 42) are necessary for optimal success. This can be achieved by experts in the field conveying knowledge or through the



sharing of collective expertise within the group. Ongoing feedback will provide the teachers the support needed to sustain them in the acquisition of a new skill set.

For the creation of a Catholic Coalition for Special Education, an informational letter will be sent to Rhode Island Catholic schools and parishes. Leadership will then be responsible for disseminating the information to parents and parishioners in their respective databases. An advertisement for an informational meeting will be posted on social media and in the local Catholic newspaper. As the original CCSE was founded in 2004 to serve students and families in the Washington D.C. and Maryland area, this non-profit can serve as a resource in the creation of a CCSE serving communities in the Northeast.

### **Funds Needed**

The funding required for this solution mainly comes in the form of teacher salaries. A school needs one teacher certified in special education in order to start the program. In Rhode Island, the median salary for a special educator is approximately \$50,000. Additionally, 20% of this salary must be allotted for taxes and benefits. Once the program participation reaches four to six students, an additional teacher would be hired, and therefore the overall budget would increase. If the Options program were to be developed in a new building structure, there might be a large capital expense. As the program will be implemented in an existing school, there is little to no cost in terms of the physical plant. The infrastructure already in place would be modified or repurposed to accommodate Options classrooms. Utility and property tax expenses are examples of costs that would remain stable and therefore would not impact the budget through the creation of the Options program. Additional funds would be needed to supplement the existing curriculum and tailor some subjects to the Options curriculum, for example math and English. The amount needed would be less than \$5,000.

There would be little to no cost associated with the creation of the CCSE, except for the fee for placing an ad in the newspaper.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

There are many roles associated with this solution. The administration of St. Teresa's school would be responsible for the overall implementation of an Options program. The leadership will not only be tasked with the duties and functions of overseeing the Options program, but also, perhaps more importantly, will be responsible for setting the tone of acceptance and enthusiasm for the privilege of educating Options students. The principal or head of school will be required to hire a program director and special education teacher, which could be one individual who fulfills both roles at the outset. The program director will be responsible for curriculum development and the management of the special educator, the Options students, and the peer mentors. The special educator will implement the curriculum and instruct the students in their daily classes. This individual will also serve as the first contact for any mentoring concerns. The peer mentors will be responsible for participating in a training workshop, volunteering their time to work in a one-on-one capacity with an Options student in the classroom, and attending additional school/Options functions. Mentors would use their free period when serving within their mentorships, so they would need to manage their remaining time to complete their own schoolwork. Parents of mentors will serve in a supporting role to their children by encouraging their participation and helping mentors to sustain their relationships while maintaining other areas of their lives. A school chaplain or campus ministry department, if applicable, will provide the necessary religious foundation for the principles of Catholic social teaching, stewardship, and inclusion.

The CCSE would require an interested party to serve as the chairperson, coordinate meetings, and fulfill the associated responsibilities. The main role of the Coalition will be to acquire support and funding for programs, to create Options programs, and to implement professional development in special education through ongoing workshops and encourage teachers to pursue degrees in the special education field.

### **Timeline**

The timeline for a solution of this scope is a minimum of one year to eighteen months. The bulk of this time will be dedicated to the training of teachers, which increases their self-efficacy and improves overall perspectives of inclusion. The initial months will be used to consult with members of existing programs, hire and train a director and teacher, and provide school-wide professional development in the area of inclusion. Peer mentors will also be recruited, interviewed, and trained in the subsequent months. The curriculum for the Options program is available upon request from the St. Joseph Options Program and can be modified to suit the unique needs of the St. Teresa school community. The enrollment of Options students can be achieved through information sharing at Open Houses, on the school website, through printed materials, and by word of mouth. Ideally, the start of the Options program would coincide with the beginning of a new school year. The program will be evaluated on an ongoing basis, both formally and informally. Appendix F shows the timeline for solution implementation and describes the actions taken.

### **Solution Implications**

The implications for the creation of an Options program for female students with disabilities are many and far reaching. Beginning with the most positive and most apparent implication, students with disabilities will directly benefit from an Options program. This

program will serve students in a Catholic school who have previously not had this opportunity. By doing so, these students' academic, social, emotional, and spiritual needs will be bolstered, and the opportunities for their future will be increased. An additional benefit exists for the mentors of the program who will gain a deeper understanding of and empathy for more vulnerable, but just as worthy, individuals in their community. The experience of working in this capacity will be an asset for students completing college applications and will add to their knowledge base. The relationships formed through this program represent a clear positive implication of the creation of an Options program.

Through the creation of an Options program, St. Teresa's school can boost enrollment numbers at a time when many Catholic schools face dwindling enrollment. According to NCEA (2020), the number of Catholic schools in the United States that have closed since 2010 is 911, and the number of students enrolled has declined by 382,044. St. Teresa's school will be expanding its demographic and broadening its mission to appeal not only to college preparatory pupils, but also to those students who might opt for a life skills/Options route, which are not mutually exclusive.

At the broadest level, the creation of this program fulfills the great commandment written in Matthew 22:36-40 (*New International Version*, 2011): "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" Additionally, the biblical mandate of Matthew 25:40 (*New International Version*, 2011) instructs Christians that "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Through the inclusion

of students with disabilities, the community of St. Teresa's school is directly showing love and care for those on the margins and thereby pleasing the Lord.

There are implications of this solution that present challenges as well, the most obvious being the cost to implement and sustain such a program. While tuition accounts for a small portion of funds, a substantial amount is needed in the form of donations from benefactors and donors. Securing these funds can present a significant barrier to the creation of the Options program. School leadership will need to put forth fundraising efforts and consider increased tuition costs for Options students. The school's Director of Institutional Advancement will be an integral player in the cultivating of relationships with potential donors, by connecting with individuals that have an interest in the Options' mission.

Data collected from the study indicates that teacher attitudes toward the creation of an Options program are mixed. Many teachers appreciate the concept of inclusion but are wary of its feasibility and the associated training and workload required for an endeavor of this scope. To offset these requirements, the administration will need to set the tone for a shift in mindset that enthusiastically advances the school community toward the goal.

Ideally, the CCSE will be formed immediately and can be used as a resource throughout the Options implementation process.

### **Evaluation Plan**

After implementation, an evaluation of the Options program will be needed to ensure its long-term success for all stakeholders. Rossi et al. (2009) describes two types of evaluation that inform improvement in a program. The first, outcome evaluation, reveals the extent to which a program is achieving its target outcomes and indicates the short-term changes that can be seen among the participants (Rossi et al., 2009). Impact evaluation is broader and refers to the long-

term effects the program has on the school or community. Both outcome and impact evaluation are significant in assessing the efficacy of a program. First, ongoing assessment indicates areas of the program that need to be modified for optimal effectiveness. The evaluative measures will include the satisfaction of the students, mentors, parents, and staff, which can be measured both informally and formally using satisfaction surveys. The enrollment, retention, and graduation of Options students from St. Teresa's school is another evaluative measure that will indicate the achievement of target outcomes.

The delimitations placed on the study include the choice to specifically examine an all-girl Catholic high school in Rhode Island. This school was chosen because it is the only all-girl model in the state, and there already exists an all-boy Options program at another institution. Examining St. Teresa's school would provide data to inform the possible implementation as an all-girl counterpart. The literature points to teacher attitudes and poor leadership as potential barriers to inclusion, therefore this study focused on the perceptions of teachers and administrators.

This study was limited in scope, so to make the results more generalizable to a larger population, further research is needed. Another limitation of the study is the impact of the global pandemic occurring during data collection. Conducting research and collecting data from teachers and administrators during a time of unrest in the educational system proved to be a challenge and affected the rate of participation.

Further study is warranted to examine the perceptions of students with special needs, mentors, and parents, which would result in a more comprehensive view of the impact of inclusion on stakeholders. Evaluation research of the existing Options models could help to gauge the success of these programs and provide valuable insight. Since both the literature and

data illuminated teachers' lack of training and preparation for implementing inclusion as an obstacle, more research in best practices that will support and prepare teachers and school leaders is crucial. Finally, more research on Catholic schools in general can add to the literature, which currently focuses on public education. Additionally, it was not easy to find studies conducted at the secondary level, as the researcher found the bulk of the literature examined data regarding elementary or higher education.

### **Summary**

The inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools indicates that value is placed on these vulnerable learners, and they are worthy of a faith-based education regardless of their learning differences. In order for an Options programs to thrive, a shift in the mindset among leaders, teachers, and others within the school community must occur.

Research indicates that the inclusion of students with special needs aids in their academic, social, and emotional development (Bakken, 2016; Brock, 2018; Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Griffin, 2016; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015). Studies on mentoring relationships not only corroborate this fact, but also show that students without disabilities directly benefit from inclusionary practices as well (DeVroey et al., 2016). Peer mentoring, as a specific Options program component, creates a more complete inclusion model that can aid students' academic, social, and emotional development (Donohue, 2008; Griffin, 2016). The preponderance of stakeholders' perspectives examined in this study endorse inclusion programs utilizing peer mentoring. In 1991, the NCEA stated that Catholic school systems must ensure "that there are places in Catholic schools for the children of all Catholic families, wherever they live, whatever their income, and whatever special needs and gifts their children have" (Crowley & Wall, 2007, p. 5). Currently, for many families in the United States, parents are forced to choose between

their child's special educational needs being served and educating their child in a Catholic school environment.

This applied research was intended to discover how the problem of the lack of special education programs in a Rhode Island Catholic school can be solved. The information gathered through an in-depth literature review and a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis indicate clearly the personal and academic benefits of creating an Options program for girls in a Rhode Island Catholic high school.



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## Appendix A

## IRB Approval letter

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 12, 2020

Shannon McMahon  
Constance Pearson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-64 AN APPLIED STUDY EXAMINING INCLUSION MODELS  
IN AN ALL-GIRLS RHODE ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL

Dear Shannon McMahon, Constance Pearson:

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

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

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Research Ethics Office

## Appendix B

2/10/2020



Dear Shannon McMahon:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “An Applied Study Examining Inclusion Models In An All-Girls Rhode Island Catholic High School”, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty/staff, invite them to participate in your study, and receive and utilize the archival data related to the Options program for your research study.

The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,



Warwick, RI 02889

2/10/2020

[REDACTED]

Dear Shannon McMahon:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “An Applied Study Examining Inclusion Models In An All-Girls Rhode Island Catholic High School”, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty/staff and invite them to participate in your study, and receive and utilize the archival data related to the Options program for your research study.

The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

## Appendix C

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** An Applied Study Examining Inclusion Models in an All-Girls Rhode Island High School

**Principal Investigator:** Shannon McMahon, M. Ed., Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a teacher or administrator at [REDACTED]. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this applied study will be to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girls, private school in Rhode Island, that addresses the students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and to design a proposal of recommendations for other private schools.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an online survey. The survey will last approximately 10-15 minutes and be conducted on Survey Monkey.
2. Participate in an optional, audio-recorded interview after the survey. Interested participants should click on the sign-up link in the email where this form was attached or contact the researcher using the contact information below in order to participate in the interview. The interview will be held either in-person or through an online service, such as Zoom, and should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete. Participants will be selected as first come, first served until 15 participants have been selected. If more than 15 participants wish to participate, interview slots will be assigned at random with a larger number of slots given to teachers.
3. Review the interview transcript, which will take approximately 20 minutes. Participants will be emailed their transcript 1 to 2 weeks after the interview and have 5 days to confirm the transcript's accuracy or provide any feedback to the researcher by email.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include improving best practices for educating students with special educational needs.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

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

- Participant survey responses will be anonymous. Participant interview responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Digital data will be stored on a password-locked computer, and physical data will be stored in a locked file box. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time, prior to submitting the survey/prior to or shortly after being interviewed, without affecting those relationships.

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study and you are only completing the survey, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study and you are completing the survey and the interview, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you in the form of interview responses will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. The survey responses will be anonymous and the researcher will be unable to delete that data from the study once the survey has been submitted.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Shannon McMahon. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 401-996-6457 or [smcmahon1@liberty.edu](mailto:smcmahon1@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Constance Pearson, at [cpearson@liberty.edu](mailto:cpearson@liberty.edu).

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



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

### Your Consent

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

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

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

***The signature lines below are for those participants who complete both the survey and interview. Participants who complete the survey only do not have to sign this document.***

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## Consent

**Title of the Project:** AN APPLIED STUDY EXAMINING INCLUSION MODELS IN AN ALL-GIRLS RHODE ISLAND CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

**Principal Investigator:** Shannon McMahon, M. Ed., Liberty University

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a teacher or administrator at [REDACTED]. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this applied study will be to solve the problem of a lack of comprehensive special education programming in an all-girls, private school in Rhode Island, which addresses the students' academic, social, and emotional needs; and to design a proposal of recommendations.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured interview, which will take approximately 45-minutes to one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded.
2. Make records available to the researcher such as program information, IEPs, and demographic information.

### How could you or others benefit from this study

The direct benefit and benefits to society include the gaining of information that will aid in the understanding of best practices for educating students with special educational needs.

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday teaching.

### How will personal information be protected?

- The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.
- Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### **Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher has no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [REDACTED]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your survey responses. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you in the form of interview responses will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Shannon McMahon. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 401-996-7457 and/or smcmahon1@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor.

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

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

#### **Your Consent**

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

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

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

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## Appendix D

## Recruitment Letter

August 15, 2020

Dear Potential Participant:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to seek to solve the problem of the lack of comprehensive, inclusive special education programming in an all-girl Catholic School in Rhode Island and to formulate a solution to address the problem, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and an educator or administrator at [REDACTED]. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an online survey. The survey will last approximately 10-15 minutes and be conducted on SurveyMonkey. Interested participants may also notify me at this time if they would like to participate in an audio-recorded interview after the survey. The interview will be held either in-person or through an online service, such as Zoom, and should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete. Participants will be selected as first come, first served until 15 participants have been selected. If more than 15 participants wish to participate, interview slots will be assigned at random with a larger number of slots given to teachers. Interview participants will be emailed their interview transcript one to two weeks after the interview. Reviewing the transcript should take approximately 20 minutes. The participants will have 5 days in which to confirm the transcript's accuracy or provide any feedback to the researcher by email. Participation in the survey will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. However, names and other identifying information will be requested as part of the interview, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate in the survey, please click here  
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DFHYFD8>.

If you would like to be interviewed, please email [smcmahon1@liberty.edu](mailto:smcmahon1@liberty.edu) to schedule a time. Feel free to contact me at 401-996-6457 or [smcmahon1@liberty.edu](mailto:smcmahon1@liberty.edu) for more information.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Participants only participating in the survey do not need to sign the consent form and, after reading it, may click on the survey link above to complete the survey. Participants participating in the interview will need to sign the consent form and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,  
Shannon McMahon M. Ed

401-996-6457/ [Smcmahon1@liberty.edu](mailto:Smcmahon1@liberty.edu)

## Appendix E

## Timeline for Solution Implementation

<b>Month(s)</b>	<b>Plan Description</b>
1-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consult with existing Options program on program specifics</li> <li>• Discuss creation of, mission of, implementation of in school-wide meetings</li> </ul>
6-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey current families to ascertain if need exists within existing school community</li> <li>• Conduct preliminary advertising of Options program in church bulletin, school website, parish mailings</li> <li>• Hire or appoint Program Director and teacher (if funds allow)</li> </ul>
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train Program Director and teacher. Hold trainings for all school personnel.</li> <li>• Hold an Open House for prospective students</li> <li>• Enroll Options students</li> </ul>
13-15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit, interview, and train peer mentors</li> <li>• Begin Options Program</li> </ul>
16-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate Options Program through informal observations and assessment and satisfaction surveys of stakeholders</li> </ul>