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## Counternarratives of Students with Dis/abilities in One Rural School District

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COUNTERNARRATIVES OF STUDENTS WITH DIS/ABILITIES IN ONE RURAL SCHOOL  
DISTRICT

by

CHRISTY DESCARTES

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry into the educational experience of students with dis/abilities who are excluded from the general education classroom in one rural Georgia school district. Theoretically my dissertation research builds on critical disability studies (Erevelles 2000, 2002, 2005, 2015; also Annamma 2018; Tremain 2005), critical geography (Harvey 2000; Helfenbein, Jr. 2004; Soja 1989, 2010), and curriculum studies (Maudlin 2008; Snowber 2016; Springgay & Freedman 2008; Swanson 2008). Methodologically building on counter-narrative inquiry (Bell 1999; Delgado 1989; He & Ayers 2009; He & Ross 2015; He, Ross, & Seay 2015; Solórzano & Yosso 2002), art-based research (Barone & Eisner 2006; Coles 1992; also Bae-Dimitriadis 2020), and those conducting research with children with dis/abilities (Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova 2016; Søndergaard & Reventlow 2019; Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, 2015; Maxwell 2006), I explore the counternarratives of three students with significant dis/abilities, Kara, Alvin, and Derek, to counter master narratives, which devalue, dehumanize, and disenfranchise them. I propose an embodied curriculum within a beloved community (hooks, 1996) and infused with a pedagogy of heart (Freire, 1997) as a replacement to the current curriculum of exclusion and despair. Six findings have emerged from my dissertation research: (1) When conducting research with students with dis/abilities, researchers must create a safe and welcoming space in which their confidentiality is protected, and their

stories are told through a comfortable medium. (2) Arts-based research transgresses traditional dissertation inquiries to tell the silenced narrative of students with dis/abilities and liberate their voice from the constraints of ableism. (3) Counternarratives empower children with dis/abilities to share valuable insights into their educational experience and speak against the master-narrative of ableism and privilege that often disenfranchises and dehumanizes them as deficient, inferior and failures. (4) Exclusion in education damages the sense of worth and belonging of students with dis/abilities, furthers their marginalization, and sabotages their potential in school and life. (5) There is a demand to engender an embodied curriculum within a beloved community and infused with a pedagogy of heart that disrupts the ableism inherent in dominant educational structures, practices, and policies for students with intellectual dis/abilities which prevent them from reaching graduation and thriving in life. (6) Instead of imprisoning the bodies and minds of students with dis/abilities, educators must work with other educational workers such as teachers, administrators, educational staff, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy of caring and justice, cultivate a culturally inspiring school environment, and create hopes, dreams, and equal opportunities for students with dis/abilities and all others to reach their highest potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

INDEX WORDS: Counternarratives, Students with dis/abilities, Arts-based educational research, Critical disability studies, Critical geography, Curriculum studies

COUNTERNARRATIVE OF STUDENTS WITH DIS/ABILITIES IN ONE RURAL SCHOOL

DISTRICT

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Electronic Version Approved:  
July 2021

## DEDICATION

This work is for my students: past, present, and future. I hope I touch your lives, as you have mine, and that the impression I leave behind is one of hope, love, and acceptance.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their guidance, feedback, and support. To Dr. Ming Fang He: Thank you for not giving up on me. Your tireless patience and guidance inspired me to persist on despite the challenges. To Dr. Peggy Shannon-Baker: Thank you for your support through the challenging IRB process. To Dr. Daniel Chapman: Thank you for your suggestions and the recommendation of the work of Robert Coles. To Dr. Nirmala Erevelles: Thank you for the work you are doing with disability issues in Curriculum Studies. It provided me with a firm foundation in which to anchor my own understandings.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
LIST OF FIGURES.....	5
PROLOGUE.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	13
Research Contexts.....	13
Study Overview.....	24
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	31
Theoretical Framework.....	31
3 METHODOLOGY.....	59
Rationale for Study Design.....	61
Study Design.....	67
Challenges for My Research.....	71
4 COUNTERNARRATIVES.....	73
Kara.....	73
Alvin.....	83
Derek.....	92
Reflections on Methodology.....	102
Reflections on Theoretical Framework.....	105
5 REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	109
EPILOGUE.....	124
REFERENCES .....	126
APPENDICES	
TECHNICAL TERMS USED IN THIS STUDY.....	136

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Kara's Positive Educational Experience .....	77
Figure 2: Kara's Negative Educational Experience.....	80
Figure 3: Alvin's Positive Educational Experience .....	87
Figure 4: Alvin's Negative Educational Experience .....	89
Figure 5: Derek's Positive Educational Experience .....	96
Figure 6: Derek's Negative Educational Experience .....	98

## PROLOGUE

When I accepted my position as the elementary GAA<sup>1</sup> (Georgia Alternate Assessment) teacher in August 2012, I inherited a class of 10 students (6 full-day students and 4 part-day students). Despite the students who had been promoted to the middle school, moved out of county, and transferred into other placements, in my final year as the elementary GAA teacher, my classroom had grown to 18 full-day students. The Georgia Department of Education anticipates no more than 1% of the testing population to be on an alternate assessment, which equaled approximately 4 students for this rural elementary school. The roots of my interest in this inquiry topic emerge from my experiences teaching these students, building relationships with them, and wanting to help them better their education and, ultimately, their lives.

“Why do you have so many?” I heard this question often as we left the building following breakfast, one of the few times during the day that my class was inside the main building of the school. I often asked myself this same question. Eventually, the answer to that question factored largely into my decision to leave that position. I was better able than many of the general education teachers at addressing the needs of students with learning and behavior challenges. Instead of investing in the improvement of the teachers’ instruction and classroom management, the school relocated “difficult” students as though they did not belong in the general education classroom. As my class grew at a seemingly exponential rate, more and more frequently other teachers commented with surprise, “You have enough for a real class!”

Some of the students who were referred to my classroom were appropriately placed according to conventional assumptions of dis/ability<sup>2</sup> and learning. They were unable to communicate their needs, intolerant of sights, sounds, and touch, and/or had significant academic deficits and delays. My students were representative of those who many teachers and

stakeholders accused of diverting precious time, attention, and support from students in the general education classroom, who they considered a safer investment of school resources.

Administration failed to understand the needs of students with diverse abilities, and the board of education claimed there were “no funds” to add support to the general education classrooms.

Therefore, the only educational setting available to these students was the most exclusive one, the self-contained classroom.

Other students were placed into my room because of their behavior. They threw tantrums or refused to complete assignments. They seemed unable, or in the eyes of their general education teachers, unwilling, to forsake their culture of poverty in exchange for the standard middle-class behaviors (recognition of authority, punctuality, and productivity) that characterize the typical public school. Their general education teachers often were overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them, untrained or unwilling to motivate students with differences, and/or intolerant of any student who challenged their authority in the classroom. Without proper training and appropriate supports, most teachers were unable to consistently create classroom environments that fostered learning in all students. Students continuously experiencing failure become understandably frustrated. When those students are too young and too immature to understand and articulate those feelings of frustration, they often communicate their frustration with undesirable behaviors. In January 2016, our new superintendent brought in members from the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) to evaluate each school in the county to determine our areas of weakness. Problems uncovered in their report included the management of students and a need for consistent positive discipline to address system-wide behavior problems, an issue that many of our teachers were often heard complaining about in the hallways

and one that contributed to the flow of students through the pipeline that deposited them into special education, and oftentimes, my classroom.

Students were placed in my room by special request, as well. Even though their academic skills fell not far behind their peers, and they demonstrated adequate social skills, they could not pass a standardized assessment or perform well enough to meet the standard set for promotion to the next grade. These students had parents who would not permit their children to be retained or teachers who could not meet all their students' needs with their limited knowledge, understanding, and resources. Given the push to use student test scores to evaluate teacher performance, teachers were fearful of being penalized for those students' failing test scores and often recommended these students for special education services.

Unfortunately, the administrative decision to place all of these students into my classroom resulted in a great injustice to the students. They could not receive the intensive supports they needed, due to the increased student to teacher ratios and the decreased resources. In addition, they had been ejected from their classroom, removed from their peers and friends. They were forced, as children, to shoulder the blame of their inadequate educational situation, because of their inability to conform to an abstract external standard imposed upon them of society's idea of a "good" and "successful" student. Placing them in my room removed the threat of failing grades, because my students were graded on successful engagement in activities that were within their zone of proximal learning, regardless of their grade level, while receiving appropriate supports which were not often offered in the general education classroom. The threat of failing the state required assessment was transferred from the student to the teacher – who spent months administering the alternate assessment which did not evaluate the students'

performance but, instead, the teacher's ability to prepare and submit all required documents exactly as outlined in the 200 plus page manual received in the fall of each school year. As of the 2018-2019 school year, this assessment has been redesigned into a standardized assessment to ensure greater rigor in the teaching of grade level standards to students in self-contained classes.

Students with dis/abilities graduate at a lower rate than students without dis/abilities. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) reports that in 2014, of students with dis/abilities, 66% graduated with a regular diploma and 14% completed high school with an alternate certificate. For the State of Georgia, graduation rates for students with dis/abilities were much lower at only 36.5% in 2014 (*High School Graduation Rates by State*, n.d.). According to the Georgia Department of Education, in 2014, in the county in which I taught, the graduation rate of students with dis/abilities was only 9.1%, while the graduation rate for all students was 56.4%. The graduation rate for students with dis/abilities in this county was significantly lower than the country and state averages and significantly lower than the rate for all students within their county.

The accomplishment of attaining a diploma imparts value upon its recipient. For the student, the diploma is evidence of educational achievement, a validation of the years spent in the classroom doing the hard work of learning. For students with dis/abilities, it also contributes to a sense of self-worth to combat a legacy of being made to feel inferior. They have completed the journey despite the obstacles placed in their path. The diploma also gives them the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education and/or find employment that offers more than part time hours or minimum wage. Even if an individual secures a job without a high school diploma, opportunities for advancement will typically require one. Therefore, the discrepancy in the number of diplomas earned by high school students with dis/abilities, versus those without, is

representative of the difference in opportunities available to those students as they leave high school and prepare for the future, and of the difference in self-image the student will have to motivate them in pursuing a higher quality of life.

My goal with this study is to compose a dissertation that supports social justice through an analysis of my former students' educational experiences. I want to explore the opportunity for greater equity for students with dis/abilities within the schools. Improving the educational situation for students considered to have significant dis/abilities involves providing them with improved educational experiences that will, hopefully, encourage them to continue to pursue educational opportunities through high school and beyond.

Theoretically, my dissertation work draws upon several bodies of literature including critical disability studies (Erevelles 2000, 2002, 2005, 2015; also Annamma 2018; Tremain 2005), critical geography (Harvey 2000; Helfenbein, Jr. 2004; Soja 1989, 2010), and curriculum studies (Maudlin 2008; Snowber 2016; Springgay & Freedman 2008; Swanson 2008). These scholars have sought to empower individuals who are denied basic rights and equal access to the supports provided to those privileged by social and governmental institutions. For example, in “(Im)material Citizens: Cognitive Disability, Race and the Politics of Citizenship,” Erevelles (2002) considers the failure of disability studies to explore issues of humanity in relation to individuals with severe and/or cognitive dis/abilities and discusses the possibility of changing inequitable societal constructs by changing the way we think about the dyad of dependency versus autonomy and how these ideas are tied to the culture of capitalism. For another example, in “A Radical Geography: Curriculum Theory, Performance, and Landscape,” Helfenbein (2004) proposes a “radical geography of education” in which educators can choose to

create an educational space that recognizes the normalcy of difference by teaching acceptance and respect.

My methodological framework builds on the work of scholars in counternarrative inquiry (Bell 1999; Delgado 1989; He & Ayers 2009; He & Ross 2015; He, Ross, & Seay 2015; Solórzano & Yosso 2002), art-based research (Barone & Eisner 2006; Coles 1992; also Bae-Dimitriadis 2020), and those conducting research with children with dis/abilities (Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova 2016; Søndergaard & Reventlow 2019; Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, 2015; Maxwell 2006). As educational research, the use of counternarrative as a method toward social justice is being seen in the field of Curriculum Studies. In “Research with a Heart: Activist Practitioner Inquiry on the Landscape of Diversity,” He and Ayers (2009) discuss the use of narrative and counternarrative in educational research to access the complex nature of human experiences. In “Narrative of Curriculum in the South: Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, and Power,” He and Ross (2012) use counternarratives as a way to “challenge traditional ways of engaging in and interpreting curriculum research and affirm the significance of curriculum inquiry as a form of liberatory or radical democratic practice” (p. 1). In “Methodological Dilemmas in Social Justice Research in the U.S. South,” He, Ross, and Seay (2015) discuss the methodological tensions that arise from the use of social justice inquiry in the U.S. south due to the persistent oppression of marginalized groups.

All but one of my students were verbal and spoke either spontaneously or when prompted; however, they often communicated *best* in ways that are difficult to record and document. I received flicking and grunting in response to my assigning of undesirable tasks and flapping and squealing in response to tasks that made my students feel joy and success. These



expressions communicated to me intense emotion and independent opinion as clearly as a peal of laughter from any child broadcasts his/her elation. However, I am an individual who was not only familiar with my students, but also, deeply devoted to them. Through drawing, my students can share their stories of joy, sadness, success and disappointment in the public school system. Their pictures and stories gives others the opportunity to see education through their eyes, outside the privileged world of ability, with the hope of encouraging greater equity and acceptance in educational spaces.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Research Contexts**

Students with significant dis/abilities risk becoming reduced to the burden that society accuses them of being. Not because of any inherent inferiority or inability to learn, but due to the inequitable distribution of educational resources (staff, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and educational space) that limits their educational opportunities and negatively impacts their academic growth. When students fail to learn in this inadequate educational environment, the ableist mindset that equates difference with deficit appears to be validated. Students with dis/abilities will continue to be denied the free and appropriate education guaranteed to them by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which has been in effect since 1975, if we fail to recognize how the construction of dis/ability, and the treatment of those considered dis/abled within our schools, are tools welded by a capitalist society to maintain current structures of power and wealth.

I know many dedicated special educators who are firmly entrenched in the belief that the greatest thing they can do for their students is to give them a safe place to learn, a place of understanding and support. While our students, like all students, should learn in such a place, it should not be one of exclusion. We should not accept the best of a bad situation and concede defeat in the face of poor uninformed administrative decisions and rampant ignorance about the social construction of dis/ability. We must become agents of social justice and insist that our students receive an equitable education that is both respectful and nurturing to them as individuals with diverse needs and varied gifts.

The ineffectiveness of the current educational situation for students with dis/abilities is obvious in our schools' inability to transform years of study (Students with dis/abilities can stay in school until the year of their 21st birthday.) into a high school diploma. Students with dis/abilities graduate at a lower rate than students without dis/abilities. According to a report by Education Week, in 2014, the state of Georgia had a 73% overall graduation rate, while students with dis/abilities graduated at a rate of just 37% (Education Week, 2016). The graduation rate for students with dis/abilities is significantly lower than the state average.

The type of education afforded an individual is representative of society's interpretation and expectations of quality of life, justice, and social responsibility for that person based on race, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and ability. These ideas can be used as benchmarks to evaluate society's treatment of those individuals and to propose remedies to, or defenses of, the treatment meted out to them. While researching issues affecting the education of students with dis/abilities, the key problems of ableism, obstacles, and injustice emerged.

### **Ableism**

When exploring issues of dis/ability, those individuals who are invested in equity must remember the mantra of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN): *Nothing About Us, Without Us*. To deny individuals a voice in the discussion of their lives dehumanizes them and devalues their lived experiences. Furthermore, to deny their voice due to a perceived inferiority based on ability is to prioritize and entitle an ableist mentality.

A quote from Amy Sequenzia (2015) provides a glimpse at ableism through the eyes of someone who regularly experiences this form of judgment and discrimination, despite being an "vocal" advocate for herself and other Autistic individuals.

I meet ableism a lot. Ableism brought forth by pity. Pity directed at me by people who seem to believe I am “trapped” inside my body, that I suffer, or that my life is so hard, they can’t understand how I can even have goals and aspirations. (para. 5-6)

As a result of a cluster of illnesses, in addition to a diagnosis of autism, Sequenzia is nonverbal and needs the support of others to complete many daily tasks. With this support, she has become an activist, a writer, and a poet. She serves on the boards of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and the Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology (FAAST). She has also presented at both national and international conferences.

By many "traditional" measures of success, Sequenzia's life meets the standard for an individual to be considered a valuable contributing member of society – employed, law-abiding, politically active. However, she also presents as an individual who is incapable of autonomy, a state of being valued in American culture and often considered an indicator of maturity. She requires in home care to accomplish tasks that are representative of adulthood – working, cooking, cleaning. She also needs some form of adaptive communication to make herself heard and understood. This need requires that the individuals and businesses with whom she interacts, both personally and professionally, are prepared for and receptive to alternative modes of communication. Proper preparation to provide support for Sequenzia, and for other individuals with diverse needs, requires training and technology – both costly resources. These resources are necessary for all individuals to have equal access to society, yet necessary to a greater or lesser degree depending on an individual’s abilities.

Who decides what resources are appropriate to support the inclusion of all citizens into society? Who organizes and provides the necessary resources, those individuals who have the resources or those individuals who need the resources? These questions embody the problem of

ableism. This issue is similar to one Myles Horton confronted when working to unionize miners in Appalachia. He explains:

We saw problems that we thought we had the answers to, rather than seeing the problems and the answers that the people had themselves. That was our basic mistake. Once you understand that, you don't have to have answers, and you can open up new ways of doing things. (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 68)

When addressing questions about how the ideas of quality of life, justice, and social responsibility relate to individuals with dis/abilities, members of the dis/ability community must be the ones to establish those definitions and expectations through self-advocacy. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) explains that self-advocacy “can refer to an individual’s efforts to take control over his or her own life” or “to the efforts of a community to take control over the public policy, media, social, societal, cultural and other broader conversations and actions about that community” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network website, 2017, page Position Statements). The website for this group provides a wealth of information for both individuals with dis/abilities and those looking to support the community of individuals with dis/abilities. In line with their message, the leadership of this group includes individuals with dis/abilities. The importance of self-advocacy, and of first seeking guidance from those we seek to support, is clearly expressed in the following quote from Paulo Freire (2010).

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed. (p. 94)

To convince individuals that a new way of doing things is necessary, we must first examine how things are being done for individuals with dis/abilities. Let us consider one of the most basic of human needs: shelter. While most adults enjoy the independence and flexibility of choosing a living situation, individuals with dis/abilities have few housing options and often little authority in the decision-making process. This issue is far too nuanced and too complex to explore in full here; however, this issue is also too important to omit entirely from this discussion. Amy S.F. Lutz outlines some of the recent history surrounding the housing of individuals with dis/abilities in her article “Who Decides Where Autistic Adults Live?” as she examines current concerns surrounding this issue. As the mother of a son who she describes as “severely autistic,” her consideration of this issue is a personal one. Lutz (2015) summarizes the current guiding principle as “community good, institution bad” (p. 2). Following the 2011 clarification of “institutional setting” by the National Council of Disability to include any housing situation where four individuals with intellectual and/or developmental dis/abilities live, many states have disallowed the use of federal funds for housing situations that could be considered “institutional.” One unfortunate side effect of this regulation is a considerable limiting of housing options. With fewer group homes as housing possibilities, direct-care positions are a necessary means to provide missing supports for individuals with dis/abilities and their families. Lutz (2015) describes some of the issues impacting the quality of direct-care. “The qualifications frequently end at a GED and a driver’s license.... 45 percent of workers live below the poverty line.... [T]he field has a 70-percent turnover rate” (p. 9).

The idea of community has its own problems. Does “community” require exposure to individuals with and without dis/abilities? Some individuals with dis/abilities seek an intentional community to leave behind the feeling of needing to “pass” as neurotypical. Should housing

options be the same, or determined by the same criteria, when considering individuals who are aggressive and who harm themselves and/or others? Throughout the article, Lutz often raises questions instead of answering them and continues to pose the question of “who” should be making these decisions while presenting the differing opinions of both people with dis/abilities and those who have spent years working in support of them. Though Lutz’s article fails to offer a solution to the housing crisis facing individuals with dis/abilities (80,000 Autistic adults are on residential waiting lists and half a million Autistic children will reach adulthood in the next decade (Lutz, 2015)), she highlights the complexity not only of the issue but also of the question.

### **Obstacles**

When society imposes its valuation on the lives of its members, those who fall outside the desired “norm” are often denied equal access to its resources. This denial of opportunity creates a trap of dependency into which those individuals with dis/abilities fall victim, causing them to rely on state and/or community support to maintain a limited livelihood. Sequenzia can be considered fortunate, because she has accessed the scarce supports available to individuals with dis/abilities and has overcome various obstacles that prevent many individuals with dis/abilities from becoming adequately employed. Many other individuals with dis/abilities find those obstacles insurmountable, especially when their dis/abilities intersect with racial, gender, and/or socio-economic bias and discrimination. Sparrow Rose Jones (2013) provides a poignant description of what that life looks like.

I live in crushing poverty. I live on SSI, Medicaid, and food stamps, which means that I live about 20% below the poverty threshold. If I marry, I lose much of that and become dependent on my husband.... If I marry someone else on SSI the two of us lose about

25% of our cash and resources.... I have never been able to keep a job, which means before I started getting SSI, I was unable to consistently keep a roof over my head or food to eat. I spent a lot of time sleeping in the park, in public restrooms, on loading docks. I ate at soup kitchens and out of dumpsters and off of what food I could steal. I entered into sexual relationships with strangers in exchange for a place to sleep and food to eat. (p. 54-55)

When discussing issues of quality of life, we must ensure that the discussion focuses on the improvement of the living situations of individuals with dis/abilities and not on what kind of life is worth living. Frank Stephens, an actor and an activist with Down syndrome, spoke at Capitol Hill to support the funding of cancer and Alzheimer's treatment in connection with Down syndrome. Stephens (2017) began his speech with the powerful statement "I am a man with Down syndrome, and my life is worth living" (0:47 - 0:53 minute). As he continues, Stephens (2017) provides three reasons why people with Down syndrome have value.

Seriously, I don't feel I should have to justify my existence, but to those who question the value of people with Down syndrome... First, we are a medical gift to society, a blueprint for medical research into cancer, Alzheimer's, and immune system disorders. Second, we are an unusually powerful source of happiness. A Harvard based study has discovered that people with Down syndrome as well as their parents and siblings are happier than society at large... Finally... we are the canary... in the eugenics coal mine. We are giving the world a chance to think about the ethics of choosing which humans get a chance at life. Is there really no place for us... in the world? (2:22 - 5:14 minute)

Stephens' speech followed a report from CBS on the near elimination of Down syndrome births in Iceland as a result of the 100% termination rate of pregnancies testing positive for



chromosomal abnormalities in prenatal screenings. The report also includes termination rates for the United States (67% between 1995 - 2011), France (77% in 2015), and Denmark (98% in 2015) (Quinones & Lajka, 2017). In the context of these figures, Stephens' speech is especially meaningful.

When considering questions of quality of life for individuals with disorders or dis/abilities that are considered significant, we are tempted to weigh these considerations against the degree of dependence we see in their future. Determining "dependence" allows society to anticipate the amount of medical intervention, daily living (housing) care, and educational supports these individuals may need, so that a price can be placed on their continued existence. This cost analysis of survival designed to quantify quality of life contributes to the dehumanization of the individuals in this population. Michael Ganz (2007) states that "Autism is a very expensive disorder costing our society upwards of \$35 billion in direct (both medical and nonmedical) and indirect costs to care for all individuals diagnosed each year over their lifetimes" (p. 343). Ganz (2007) goes on to explain that this analysis can be used by "health care professionals, families, and agencies in planning for future care" (p. 343) of Autistic individuals. Unfortunately, this data that could be used to determine, plan, and implement supports to empower a population of individuals, can also be used as a tool to defend exclusion and discrimination in a capitalist society that demands high returns on all investments of its resources.

Through the structure and availability of services, individuals are either helped or hindered to a point of greater or lesser independence. If an individual's quality of life obviously suffers from the "supports" provided, then why have resources continued to be funneled into failed/failing programs? The typical answers to this question often blame the inefficiency of

bureaucracy or the recipients' mismanagement of their resources; however, these easy quips reek of misdirection. What if these programs are not failing to accomplish their mission, but instead are supporting the structure established to maintain the dependence and the disenfranchisement of their recipients?

### ***Social Construction of Dis/ability***

To answer this question, we have to consider the development of the social construction of dis/ability. In Foucault's (1980) discussion of the mechanism of power in society, he states that in the eighteenth century

The health and physical well-being of populations comes to figure as a political objective which the 'police' of the social body must ensure along with those of economic regulation and the needs of order.... [T]he 'body' – the body of individuals and the body of populations – appears as the bearer of new variables, not merely as between the scarce and the numerous, the submissive and the restive, rich and poor, healthy and sick, strong and weak, but also as between the more or less utilizable, more or less amenable to profitable investment, those with greater or lesser prospects of survival, death and illness, and with more or less capacity for being usefully trained. (p. 171-172)

This sorting of people into categories of those who are more or less useful, more or less desirable, more or less "human," creates a need for labels. These labels are mistakenly believed by the social body to be organic descriptors of limitations and differences. When dis/ability is viewed as a medical condition needing intervention, the majority of resources dedicated to dis/ability remain in the hands of the privileged to use as they see fit. Often those resources are channeled into curing and preventing diversity seen as dis/ability instead of supporting the inclusion of diverse individuals.

In addition to the commodification of diversity, the social construction of dis/ability also supports the system of capitalism. Students considered to have significant dis/abilities receive an education lacking in the rigor and expectations experienced by students in the general education classroom. As discussed before, these students often leave school without a diploma, which limits their access to post-secondary education and adequate employment. Once labeled as dis/abled, these students are set on a path that deposits them into the pool of unskilled, poorly paid laborers necessary in capitalism to ensure that corporations are able to achieve and maintain profits.

### **Injustice**

As Freire (2010) stated of the disenfranchised people with whom he worked, “they have always been ‘inside’ – inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (p. 74). We must be prepared to transform the traditional structures that are familiar to us. The old institutions that sponsor segregation require more than a new coat of paint to become inclusive for all individuals. They require new ideas, new designs, and new practices to truly empower individuals with dis/abilities to become full members of society who can participate in the justice system as empowered individuals.

Remembering Autistic Self Advocacy Network’s motto: *Nothing About Us, Without Us*, society need not define justice for individuals with dis/abilities, but should acknowledge, respect, and participate in the conversation that is already taking place within that community of individuals, in works such as *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* and *Typed Words, Loud Voices*. We can join the conversation and be prepared to contribute to the work of creating and

continuing equality in practices and spaces that include people with dis/abilities, which should be all public domains.

The Disability Visibility Project (2014) is one part of that conversation about the intersection of dis/ability and justice. They explain,

Our work seeks to challenge the dominant narrative of dis/ability as defect, deficiency, and disorder, because this narrative paints a dis/abled person's life as a tragedy and a burden. This is precisely the kind of attitude that leads to justifications for violence against dis/abled people, when policymakers and the media alike encourage the public to sympathize with the aggressors rather than the victims. (para. 1)

Their work calls for justice for individuals with dis/abilities by reversing patterns of dehumanization and transforming the dialogue about and treatment of homicide cases when caregivers murder children and adults with dis/abilities. Shockingly, the media all too often presents the perpetrator of these heinous crimes as the victim. The family member is heralded for his/her selfless devotion to caring for the individual with dis/abilities until either the burden understandably becomes too much to bear, or until the perceived suffering of the individual with dis/abilities warrants the family member committing a mercy killing. This mindset permeates not only the media, but also the judicial system and is obvious in the light sentencing of these violent calculating murderers.

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network has begun the work of recognizing the true victims of these crimes with the annual Disability Day of Mourning, March 1st, and their development of its website, which turns the focus, and sympathy, from the murderers back to the murdered individuals with dis/abilities. The website for the Disability Day of Mourning lists 143 individuals between the ages of 5 months to 96 years who were murdered by family members in

2017. Causes of death include neglect, murder, abuse, and involuntary euthanasia. Each victim has a page with a picture (if available), date of death, age at death, location, dis/ability(ies), details of death, perpetrator's relationship to the victim, and source of information. The victims are identified from all over the world. (Disability Day of Mourning: Remembering people with disabilities murdered by their families website, n.d.)

The media coverage and sentencing following the murder of 14-year-old Alex Spourdalakis is one example of the devaluation of Autistic people by the judicial system. The murder was a series of cruel acts of violence. First, his mother, Dorothy Spourdalakis, and his godmother, Jolanta Agata Skrodzka, attempted to poison Alex. When he failed to die from the poisoning, his mother then stabbed him four times in the chest, hitting his heart twice. Finally, she slit both of his wrists. Once Alex was dead, Skrodzka took the knife and killed their cat. Despite their success at killing both Alex and the cat, their subsequent suicide attempt failed (Ruzich, 2013). Even with the suicide note outlining the horrific steps taken to murder Alex, the first-degree murder charge was reduced to involuntary manslaughter by the States Attorney. Their attorneys commented that “the two women [felt] an immense amount of guilt they will have to live with” (Garcia, 2016, para. 8). While Spourdalakis and Skrodzka live with their guilt, they will do so as free women being sentenced to time served, a total of three years; but Alex's life has been cut short, ended by the individuals who were supposed to protect and care for him.

## **Study Overview**

### **Purpose of Study**

My goal is to compose a dissertation that supports social justice through an analysis of my former students' educational experiences and by proposing an embodied curriculum. I want

to explore the opportunity for greater equity for students with dis/abilities within the schools by asking: How do students with a mild intellectual dis/ability experience education in a self-contained setting? Improving the educational situation for students considered to have significant dis/abilities involves providing them with improved educational experiences that will, hopefully, encourage them to continue to pursue educational opportunities through high school and beyond to prepare them to become empowered citizens and self-advocates.

### **Theory**

The theoretical framework of my dissertation draws upon the work of scholars from critical disability studies (Erevelles 2000, 2002, 2005, 2015; also Annamma 2018; Tremain 2005), critical geography (Harvey 2000; Helfenbein, Jr. 2004; Soja 1989, 2010), and curriculum studies (Maudlin 2008; Snowber 2016; Springgay & Freedman 2008; Swanson 2008). When analyzing the educational experiences of these students, I am interested in exploring how their label of dis/abled affects the quality of education they receive. Considered “significantly” dis/abled by the school system, they receive a modified education in a space of exclusion. I question whether this is the most appropriate educational setting for them, and suggest an improved educational situation located within a “beloved community” (hooks, 1996) and driven by a “pedagogy of heart” (Freire, 1997).

### **Methodology**

My methodological framework builds on the work of scholars counternarrative inquiry (Bell 1999; Delgado 1989; He & Ayers 2009; He & Ross 2015; He, Ross, & Seay 2015; Solórzano & Yosso 2002), art-based research (Barone & Eisner 2006; Coles 1992; also Bae-Dimitriadis 2020), and those conducting research with children with dis/abilities (Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova 2016; Søndergaard & Reventlow 2019; Jenkin, Wilson,

Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, 2015; Maxwell 2006). As a non-dis/abled researcher conducting a study about an issue affecting individuals with dis/abilities, I chose to highlight the voice of my participants by collecting and analyzing their counter-narratives. Due to their communication differences, arts-based education research, in general, and counter-narratives, in particular, will provide rich descriptions of their experiences through their drawings and interviews.

### ***Introduction to Participants***

My study population is comprised of students with dis/abilities, and their parents, who were in my self-contained elementary classroom for at least one year between 2012 and 2016. During the time they were in my classroom, each student invited to participate in this study was considered to have a Mild Intellectual Disability. Many of my students were also diagnosed with a secondary and, sometimes, a tertiary dis/ability, including speech/language impairment, other health impairment (an umbrella term that includes attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and Down syndrome), autism, and emotional/behavioral disorder.

Through art and interviews, the participants in the study share their counter-narratives of the educational experiences they had while excluded from the general education classroom, and often from the general education population. This data was analyzed for patterns which indicate the quality of educational opportunities afforded these students and that suggest ways to provide an improved educational situation. Their parents were also included in the interview. At this age, the parent has the responsibility to decide whether or not it is in her child's best interest for the parent to be present during the interview. In this study, the interviewer is familiar to the students and the parents; therefore, the parents may feel more comfortable with the process. As a former teacher in this school district, I am familiar with their IEP Annual Review process. The students'

participation was very limited and little effort was made to educate the students on the process or explain their eligibilities, goals, and services. Therefore, I decided to interview the parent about the details of her child's referral to and receipt of special education services.

### **Description of Classroom and Community**

Students in a self-contained classroom are excluded from general education instruction and their non-dis/abled grade level peers. They are taught a modified form of the grade-level curriculum, as well as several adaptive skills, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, fine and gross motor dexterity, and interviewing/employability. This educational setting is considered "small group." Guidelines set by the Georgia Department of Education limit a classroom serving students with a mild intellectual dis/ability to a maximum of 10 students to one teacher. The class size can be increased by 3 students for every one paraprofessional added. No more than 3 paraprofessionals can be added to a classroom to increase the number of students (PERSONNEL, FACILITIES AND CASELOADS, 2007). My classroom was the only self-contained classroom for elementary-aged students in a rural community of more than 300 square miles.

Scarcity of resources is a problem for both the school and the community. The poverty rate is higher than the state average, and the median income is lower. Therefore, funding for the school is limited, and most parents lack the ability to provide supplemental educational opportunities in the form of tutoring or online learning programs due to the costs associated with these services.



## **Significance of Study**

My study is significant due to the knowledge it contributes to the field of curriculum studies. It is my hope that this study will also improve the teaching practices of teachers of students with dis/abilities, including myself. Which in turn, I hope will improve the educational experiences of other students. My study is also significant in the choice and treatment of my participants. Students with dis/abilities, especially those considered to have cognitive dis/abilities, are rarely chosen to *participate* in research, such as this study. They are typically treated as the object of study without any knowledge worthy of collecting through interviews. Though young and labeled as dis/abled, the stories drawn and told by my former students are valued and respected as true experiences worthy of examination.

## **Chapter Outlines**

My dissertation consists of a prologue, five chapters, and an epilogue. In the Prologue, I discuss my experience as the teacher of the elementary self-contained special education classroom in a rural county in Georgia. I also examine graduation rates of students with dis/abilities as evidence of the failure of public schools to meet the needs of this population. Considering the number of students with dis/abilities who are not completing school and my experiences as a special educator, I began to question the current practices of special education, including the exclusion of students with dis/abilities from the general education population. This questioning, and my experiences working with this population of students, provoked me to investigate how my students interpreted their educational experiences.

In Chapter 1, I provide the current contexts of my research. I focus on the issues of ableism, obstacles, and injustice that are impediments to the success of individuals both in school and in the community. Ableism is the mentality that approaches dis/ability from the mindset of

deficit. Obstacles include the many physical, social, and mental barriers that prevent individuals with dis/abilities from fully accessing the supports of schools and communities. Injustice is seen in the inequitable distribution of resources between general and special education classes and in the light punishing of those found guilty of mistreatment of individuals with dis/abilities.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the development of my theoretical framework and the relevant literature from the fields of critical disability studies, critical geography, and curriculum studies. I explore issues of ability, geography, and curriculum in education by questioning the impact of socio-political influences on the educational situation of students with dis/abilities. Then I propose an embodied curriculum enriched with a “pedagogy of heart” within a “beloved community.”

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological framework for this study. I first briefly discuss how neither limited communication nor limited experience in analytical thinking is indicative of an inability to theorize improvements in their educational situation. Secondly, I discuss the rationale for my study’s design. For this study, I have collected the counternarratives of my former students through their drawings and semi-structured interviews. I then explore the research which has informed the development of this study: arts-based research (Barone & Eisner 2006; Coles 1992; also Bae-Dimitriadis 2020), arts-based research with children with dis/abilities (Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova 2016; Søndergaard & Reventlow 2019; Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, 2015; Maxwell 2006), and counternarratives (Bell 1999; Delgado 1989; He & Ayers 2009; He & Ross 2015; He, Ross, & Seay 2015; Solórzano & Yosso 2002). Then, I provide a description of my study, including participant profiles, research procedures, and the process of data analysis. I conclude the chapter

by exploring the challenges to this study including difficulties in contacting and meeting with the participants.

In Chapter 4, I present the data collected. For this study, my sources of data are the counternarratives told by my participants through drawings and interviews. I also include a description of the interview setting and a brief educational background for each participant.

In Chapter 5, I examine the drawings by noting what people, places, and activities are represented in the positive and negative experiences. When analyzing the drawings, I follow Saldana's (2016) method for analyzing photographs. He explains,

I begin not with codes but with jottings and analytic memos that document my initial impressions and holistic interpretations of the images. Afterward, I assess the credibility for my visual reading through supporting details from the photograph - evidence that affirms (or disconfirms) my personal assertions. Codes within the memo derive *from* the interpretations of the visual *as* the analytic text is composed. I also caption the photo to capture the essence of the image, as I interpret it. (p.96)

I then look for commonalities in the drawings of all the participants. I analyze these commonalities and the participants explanations of their experiences to determine what themes arise from the data. Then, I discuss the themes that have arisen from the participants' counternarratives, explore how those themes relate to the current educational experiences of students with dis/abilities, and consider improvements to their educational situation based on the lessons learned from those themes.

Then in the Epilogue, I close with a message to each of my participants. I reflect on memories of them as my students, on our time together at the interviews, and my hopes for their futures.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Theoretical Framework**

In my dissertation study, I examined the problem of the exclusion of students in one rural county in Georgia, who are perceived to have significant dis/abilities, through the lens of critical studies, such as critical disabilities studies and critical geography. My own study was inspired by the work of critical theorists who have sought to recognize those individuals denied basic rights and access to supports provided to those privileged by social and governmental institutions, such as Paulo Freire (2010) in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and those who transform our understanding of power and its structures, such as Michel Foucault (1977) in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

The theoretical framework of my dissertation draws upon several bodies of literature from critical disability studies, critical geography, and curriculum studies. My work exploring issues of ability in education was inspired by the work of Erevelles (2000, 2002, 2015) and Tremain (2005). My analysis of issues of geography in education was informed by the work of Foucault (1977, 1978, 1980), Harvey (2000), hooks (2009), and Soja (1989, 2010). My discussion of issues of curriculum in education was based upon the work of Annamma (2018) Erevelles (2005), Helfenbein, Jr. (2004), hooks (2009), Maudlin (2008) Snowber (2016), Springgay and Freedman (2008), and Swanson (2008).

#### **Critical Disability Studies**

When I began my work with these students, I misunderstood what they needed to learn to be successful in school, their community, and, eventually, the world beyond their rural county. A couple of years earlier, I had attended a professional development class about Ruby

Payne's work on impoverished students attempting to navigate the middle-class structure of public schools. I approached the dis/abilities of my students with the same mentality of deficit. I believed that I needed to sand their rough edges and teach them how to conform to the world they would have to navigate as adults. I was loving in my cruelty. I did not belittle, mock, or yell at my students for their flailing hands, echoing clicks, and unsure bouncing gaits as they walked down the hallway, but I did take minutes away from their recess as they practiced over and over again how to walk slowly on the yellow hallway line, without touching the newly painted wall, and without breaking the reverent silence indicative of serious learning.

I wonder now at my own ignorance. How could I have ever accepted the outrageous idea that maintaining the integrity of paint on the wall was more important than preserving my students' self-esteem? In actuality, much like maintaining the paint, sustaining a nice façade was my goal for my students, to show that they could fit in and be accepted as part of the school community by polishing them until they could "pass" as "normal." At that time, I accepted the discourse that those behaviors were abnormal and should be eliminated, without understanding that difference has often been equated with aberration to justify classifying diverse individuals as inferior. However, Penni Winter (2012) explains in her essay "Loud Hands & Loud Voices,"

One of the biggest and most insidious maltreatments involves the concept and practise of what I 'normalisation,' which springs out of the belief that Autism is an inferior or 'wrong' state. Thus 'becoming normal' is seen by many parents and therapists as the ultimate goal, the only one worth pursuing, because being autistic is such a Terrible Thing, and the aim of all therapy is to make us 'indistinguishable' from our 'normal' peers. Autism thus becomes something to be got rid of, no matter what sacrifices must be made. (Winter, 2012/2012, p. 115)

This idea of normalization seemed logical on the surface; after all, I was preparing them to survive in the “real world,” an unwelcome world much like the school they tentatively navigated. However, perhaps as my relationships with my students grew, I experienced moments of internal conflict in which I felt an awareness of denying them pieces of themselves and great remorse for my actions. My drive to conform them to the “outside” world transformed into the desire, no less misguided, to protect them from that world. Though I continued to lobby for their access to the main school building (we were housed in the most distant trailer from the building) for lunch and enrichment classes, such as art and physical education, I also viewed my classroom as their safe haven. Within my classroom, they were not punished for sitting on the floor to read or standing beside the table to complete their classwork. They could flap and sing and laugh and fail at a task as many times as they needed before they made that much-celebrated step toward mastery, all without fear of ridicule from their teachers or their peers.

As I grew as a teacher, becoming more knowledgeable through work and study, I realized that providing my students a safe haven within a school that failed to recognize their importance as learners and individuals was not enough. I also needed to show them how to advocate for a better, a fairer, world. I needed to teach them that they deserved the same opportunities as their peers. The scholars of critical disability studies are working toward a similar goal and their writing has informed my inquiry. Shelley Tremain (2005) is one such scholar and dis/ability activist who is applying Foucault’s analysis of power to issues of dis/ability, as I have done in this study. In addition, curriculum studies scholar, Nirmala Erevelles (2000, 2002, 2015) also works with critical disabilities studies to examine how issues of dis/ability and education intersect.

### *Socio-Political Structures*

In my critical analysis of the educational experiences of students with dis/abilities, I must consider the following questions: Who benefits from the current educational structure? What social and political ideas have influenced the manner of management of dis/abled individuals by governmental institutions, such as public schools?

Current socio-political structures shape the opportunities available to individuals based upon their usefulness to the structure. Students with dis/abilities are often caught, and even lost, within these structures. In 2000, Erevelles published “Educating Unruly Bodies: Critical Pedagogy, Disability Studies, and the Politics of Schooling.” In this article, she discusses the socio-political structure affecting the educational situation of students with dis/abilities, posing the question that must be asked when considering how the lives of people with dis/abilities can be improved. “What arrangement of social and economic conditions would be supportive of an alternative theorization of labor such that the self-worth, needs, and desires of disabled people will not be dismissed, denigrated, or completely ignored?” (Erevelles, 2000, p. 29-30).

Though her analysis was conducted twenty years ago, the situation for students with dis/abilities remains largely unchanged in public schools today. Erevelles’s use of a materialist lens in this essay is particularly relevant to my inquiry. The county where my study participants live and attend school is exceptionally poor, lacking in both monetary resources and access to basic goods and services. In January 2017, the only local grocery store closed, leaving the people of the community without access to fresh fruits and vegetables in their county until March 2018 when a local restaurant opened a small produce stand within their business. In a county such as this, money and resources are also scarce within the schools, and therefore, allocated in such a manner as to attempt to gain the greatest output for the least input.

The current social and economic conditions that support discrimination, demonization, and criminalization of individuals with dis/abilities is glaringly obvious in this community plagued by significant generational poverty, few employment opportunities, and lack of access to adequate nutrition and running water (one of my students was often seen stealing water from her neighbors' hoses to fill water bottles for her family). This community provides a pool of individuals willing to exchange their labor for little compensation, allowing nearby factories to keep their production costs down while growing their profits. These individuals, often African American and/or dis/abled, provide a vital, yet thankless role, in the system of capitalism.

Many discussions about dis/ability rights specifically address individuals of average cognitive ability. In her essay "(Im)material Citizens: Cognitive Disability, Race and the Politics of Citizenship," Erevelles (2002) considers the failure of disability studies to explore issues of humanity in relation to individuals with severe and/or cognitive dis/abilities and discusses the possibility of changing inequitable societal constructs by changing the way we think about dependency. We must accept dependency as a natural human phenomena instead of prioritizing individuality. However, she warns that even this transformation of our thinking will not be enough to grant democratic citizenship to this population. Erevelles argues that the ideals that represent productive humanity, autonomy and rationality, are tied to the culture of capitalism; therefore, before these individuals can become full citizens, the value of people must no longer be determined by the degree of their potential labor power. This change in valuation is needed before we can see equality in education.

My former students were considered to have a significant enough dis/ability that they were unable to participate in the general education curriculum, standardized testing, specials (art, music, gym), and recess. However, scores on their intelligence tests placed their cognitive



functioning in the mildly dis/abled range. While intelligence tests have been proven to be unfair measures of the intelligence of diverse students (Ford & National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2004), they are still a tool used by schools to place students into alternate educational settings.

In addition to the inaccuracies of the tests themselves, it seems statistically improbable that of all of the elementary aged students receiving special education services, during my four years of teaching there, only one student ever scored in the moderate range. She was subsequently moved to the regional state school for students with severe emotional/behavioral disorders. If one student in a classroom has an eligibility of moderate intellectual dis/ability, state guidelines require that the class size be cut, which would necessitate the hiring of a new teacher and paraprofessional, as well as the outfitting of another classroom with resources. What measure can accurately assess a child's ability to learn? Time and opportunity may be the only true tests of such potential. Who is being served by the classification of these students as intellectually dis/abled, the students who are receiving limited educational opportunities or the system which places those limits upon them?

The category of dis/ability disproportionately includes individuals of race, class, and gender groups who are systematically discriminated against, labeling them as dis/abled allows for them to be excluded from participation in the economy, and from educational opportunities in the public school. Erevelles (2000) also explains how capitalism requires a number of unemployed individuals to keep production costs low. While individuals with dis/abilities are forced to fulfill that role, capitalism fails to acknowledge their place in the system leaving them to bear a burden of ridicule and resentment for appearing to benefit from the work of others (through carefully monitored government assistance) without contributing to the economy. My

work builds on Erevelles's ideas by personalizing these issues, presenting the voice of an individual, a child labeled as dis/abled who already carries the burden of a life of opportunities and experiences sacrificed to the benefit of individuals who began life with privileges my former students will never know.

Just as individuals with dis/abilities are excluded from the market economy, because their differences are seen as an obstacle to production, students with dis/abilities are denied valuable educational resources, because their differences are seen as an impediment to their ability to learn. However, those misconceptions are being slowly disproved as individuals, such as Carly Fleischmann and Naoki Higashida, not only find their voices, but also share them with the world. Fleischmann is a nonverbal talk show host who surprisingly began to type words that she had not been taught to spell at the age of 11 (Autism Parenting Articles, 2013). Higashida is the author of more than 20 books using a letter card and computer (Higashida, 2017). While these are modern day examples of unexpected intelligence, most of us are familiar with the story of Anne Sullivan opening a world of language by spelling "water" into Helen Keller's hand in 1887.

With growing evidence that intelligence and self-awareness can be present, even if a mode to express it has not been uncovered or developed yet, we must consider how this new knowledge should transform the treatment of individuals with disabilities. Erevelles (2015) discusses the relationship between perceived intelligence and socio-political structures in "Signs of Reason: Revière, Facilitated Communication, and the Crisis of the Subject." In her exploration of "the crisis of the subject," Erevelles (2015) presents two questions that are important to this study, because they challenge both the presence and the validity of intelligence and self-awareness. She asks,

Are people who have been identified as cognitively disabled competent (or incompetent) to represent themselves? Is it possible that these people can have observable physiological, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities, but also exhibit behavior and thinking that could be termed "normal," that is, rational? (p. 46-47)

My choice to include my former students in my research is representative of my belief in the social construction of dis/ability to exploit and to silence marginalized individuals. Though they may be “diagnosed” with dis/abilities that are considered to affect cognitive functioning, they have the ability to examine their environment to identify positive and negative stimuli and to communicate their feelings. Since my inquiry seeks to address their educational experiences, then their voices should be the ones constructing those experiences. As with the Revière case and the practice of facilitated communication examined by Erevelles (2015), the stories that my students share continue to “disturb the dominant order of things.” Through the process of collecting and publishing their stories, the policy of exclusion that is in place for so many children like these is exposed as cruel and inequitable through their counternarratives.

Another way in which their stories can “disturb the dominant order of things” is through an authentic representation of them as children with dis/abilities that challenges the dominant narrative of deficit. In his work, Couser (2001) examines how writers with dis/abilities must conform to the expected narrative in order to be published. For the purposes of my study, the students presented their counternarratives. The students’ representation of their lived experiences illustrate that “their other dysfunctionalities (echolalia, compulsive behavior, and so on) do not predict a lack of intelligence” (Erevelles, 2015, p. 61), and that they are deserving of an appropriate education equal to that of their peers. This platform allows them to challenge their own marginalization.

## Critical Geography

When I think of my own educational experience, my teachers, and my peers, the landscape is devoid of otherly-abled individuals. My first memory of interacting with individuals with dis/abilities was during my senior year of high school when I participated in a dance held by the Partner's Club. This dance created a separate prom experience for students with dis/abilities. Twenty years earlier my mom had attended the same high school. She confided in me that she has a learning disability and, because she had been considered "slow," was told she could not attend prom. Despite completing thirteen years of public education, my only true interaction with someone labeled as having a dis/ability was in an extracurricular event that solicited my participation by offering community service hours to add to my college application.

When one population is almost entirely absent from the educational landscape, this absence speaks for and about that population. As a student, that absence told me that those students, hidden and removed from the classroom and the commonly frequented places within the school, were more different than they were like me, that they did not belong in class with me, and that we lived in separate worlds, never intersecting unless I chose to temporarily leave my world of privilege to provide them with some relief from their "unfortunate" circumstances. What does that absence say to those exiled students whose very existence has been orchestrated to be denied and to be profited upon? Denied through their removal from society, from their parents' homes, and their neighborhood schools. Profited upon by the legions of specialists whose careers are funded by the drive to treat diversity as illness and dysfunction.

Foucault's concept of bio-power is an insightful lens through which to view the current use of space for students with dis/abilities in education. The development of bio-power depended on two essential elements, the development of institutions and of demographic study of the

population. Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* discusses how discipline was used in institutions to train the population for use in the economy. An understanding of how institutions, such as the public schools, operate to reinforce current power structures is important in theorizing how to transform those spaces into ones in which individuals who have been disadvantaged and discarded, such as students with dis/abilities, can exercise their own power to better their lives.

In "Special Education as Neoliberal Property: The Racecraft, Biopolitics, and Immunization of Disability," Kearl (2019) discusses the intersection of poverty, race, and dis/ability in biopolitics. He explains,

The population is separated in racialized populational groups whose membership subjects them to differing qualifications of life and death. This separation is made possible by medicalizing individual lives within the population through the assumptions that presume everyone has the necessary resources to have flourishing lives. (Kearl, 2019, p. 481)

Dis/ability is typically considered a medical fact. Students are diagnosed with a particular disorder and with that diagnosis comes a prediction based on the socially accepted knowledge about that dis/ability. Parents and teachers are warned to expect students to fail academically and socially. Limitations are assumed then enforced upon the bodies of those students. This occurrence embodies the relationship between power and knowledge that Foucault (1980) explores in his collection of texts, *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972 – 1977*. He explains that power produces knowledge, a master-narrative that members of a society accept as truth. In the case of students diagnosed with dis/abilities, the master-narrative insists that they are deficient. That their differences are a sickness that needs healing or a burden from which they need to be rescued, that they cannot handle high educational expectations, make

independent decisions, or live happily in their dis/abled state. This narrative informs the type of life these individuals will live by restricting their access to classrooms, resources, peers, and extracurricular activities as students.

The idea of the social construction of dis/ability, arises from the need of capitalist economies to ensure a large pool of unskilled laborers willing to work for low wages. By labeling individuals as dis/abled, not only are their educational opportunities limited, but so is their ability to compete for higher education and skilled job opportunities. Frequently, the individuals who are labeled as dis/abled are of “undesirable” minority groups.

This social construction also supports the creation of a sector of the economy to manage and treat the individuals assigned a dis/abled status. Schools seemingly perpetuate and validate the idea of dis/ability. They “are structured to produce such apparent or dormant needs that are then mobilized to distribute students and teachers within various schooling spaces” (Naraian, 2019, p. 473). Instead analyzing the structure of the educational space and process to better integrate diverse students, schools approach dis/ability as a deficit or defect located within the individual who is given that label. They diagnosis difference as impairment and develop individualized treatment plans that include the use of specialists (special education teachers, speech therapists, behavior consultants, etc.), interventions (academic, social, and behavioral), and quarantine (exclusion).

Much as the idea of dis/ability is socially constructed, so is the idea of spatiality. For example, the concept of what constitutes personal space varies according to relationship, situation, and country of birth. We typically think of the physical landscape when considering issues of space. However, Edward Soja (1989) reveals the complicated nature of space in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* explaining that

it is both different from and connected to physical and psychological space. The space we either afford, or deny, students is not just the physical spaces that equity demands a school to provide, such as a table in the lunchroom or a classroom in the main building, but also the psychological space of considering diverse needs when either making seemingly minor decisions (sensory needs when installing florescent lights) or major decisions (allocating room in the physical education budget for modified equipment).

For the school system to provide a truly “public” education, the spatiality must be inviting for all students, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and ability. However, in many schools, the lack of psychological space is often evident in the quality and provision of physical space, and for students with dis/abilities, that space is often one of exclusion. The school system’s enforcement (power) of the physical alienation of students with dis/abilities, contributes to the development of psychological structures (knowledge) which contribute to a self-imposed sense of inferiority and ostracization. Foucault (1980) discusses the effects of power on the individual.

I am thinking rather of [power’s] capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.... [A] synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise *within* the social body, rather than *from above* it. (p. 39)

A lifetime of external restrictions that are presented as natural extensions of personal deficits in the form of a dis/ability become internalized restrictions that transform the individual’s mentality into accepting and expecting less than the average person.

When critically considering the geography of the education of students with dis/abilities, again, the legacy of the myth of inherent dis/ability emerges. Soja's (2010) explanation of how "discriminatory geographies" occur in urban areas when injustice is hidden under claims of naturally occurring phenomena mirrors the occurrence of segregation in educational practices. With the medical model of dis/ability insisting that difference is deficit, children with dis/abilities are not expected to learn. We can feel good about not teaching them academics and be pleased when they meet the low expectations of self-feeding and toileting. Even those educators who have dedicated their careers to helping students with dis/abilities mistakenly believe the best environment for those students is one that can protect them from socializing with their peers and the pressure of high educational expectations.

However, when viewing educational geography with the understanding of the social construction of dis/ability, the injustice of denying those students an appropriate education becomes evident and undeniable. Soja (2010) asserts that "segregation or the confinement of specific populations to specific areas seems clearly to be connected to the production of spatial injustice" (p. 54). This statement immediately brings to mind the plight of individuals with dis/abilities, both as students and adults. The deficiency lies not in the students but in the educational opportunities and spaces they have been given.

In *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault's (1978) discussion of bio-power explains how control of the population for the best interest of the state morphed from more heavy-handed tactics, such as execution, to more insipid means, such as government sponsored health initiatives. Instead of exercising power over life through the threat of death, power over life was now expressed by influencing lifestyles and organizing bodies. By organizing those bodies into structures of production, capitalism was able to emerge. This



change parallels the change in educational services available to students with dis/abilities. In the past, these students were publicly denied an education and, were instead, often hospitalized and/or housed in asylums. Now they are guaranteed an education by law. However, that education is separate from the one provided to students not labeled as dis/abled, despite the supreme court ruling that separate is inherently unequal. With this unequal education, students labeled as dis/abled are usually forced to accept low paying jobs and government assistance to survive, thus becoming the undesirable cog in the machine of capitalism.

The influences of historic institutional racism cannot be neglected in a discussion of dis/ability. In “Same as it Ever Was: The Nexus of Race, Ability, and Place in One Urban School District,” White, Li, Ashby, Ferri, Wang, Bern, and Cosier (2019) reveal how patterns of racism persist from the past into the educational present of students with dis/abilities. They examined the rate of inclusion of students labeled with autism, emotional and behavioral dis/orders, and intellectual dis/ability, as well as how the historic practice of redlining impacted students’ labeling and inclusion. They discovered that “Black students with autism, ED, and ID were more likely to be taught in low inclusion environments than their White peers with the same disability labels” (White et al., 2019, p. 464). Their findings regarding students with an intellectual dis/ability are particularly pertinent to this study. They state,

students with ID who were taught in low-inclusion environments, just over three-quarters of whom were Black (52%) and Latinx (25%), were primarily represented in the hyper-segregated areas of the city...[S]tudents with the label of ID were represented primarily in lower-income areas. (White et al., 2019, p. 467)

The neighborhood school is a microcosm of the community that nurtures it. Inequitable distribution of resources in the school are often present in the community, as well. While

students with dis/abilities are educated with inadequate spaces and classroom resources, adults with dis/abilities are often forced to live on the fringes of society off meager governmental supports. David Harvey (2000) discusses this idea of uneven geographical developments in his book *Spaces of Hope*. The selective concentration of wealth and power in certain geographical areas, leaves the other spaces open to neglect, decay, and violence.

This description is clearly representative of the current state of our society. In education, minority students, students with dis/abilities, and students of low socio-economic status fall into the undesirable side of the uneven geographical development within their school system. The schools or classes they attend possess few, and often, outdated materials and resources. The buildings, playgrounds, and technology are older and worn. Meanwhile new subdivisions provoke the development of shiny new buildings that welcome middle-class students with well-stocked classrooms and learning labs. Those same individuals who fell into the undesirable side of the uneven geographical development of the educational system are often forced to accept a minimum wage job that fails to lift them from poverty and to rent substandard housing in crowded neighborhoods. They live a life similar to the one described earlier by Sparrow Rose Jones. Soja (1989) states, “that social relations are simultaneously and conflictually space-forming and space-contingent” (p. 126). Therefore, how society views people with dis/abilities causes their (lack of) inclusion in public spaces, and this exclusion from public spaces feeds society’s belief that people with dis/abilities should not be included. Only through the breaking of the cycle, can the truth be revealed.

Harvey (2000) calls for us to become “insurgent architects” and draft a new blueprint for society. One that is responsive to external nature and to human nature. This idea includes community that is both “personal and universal” with “open dialogue and practical interactions

across theaters” (p. 253). While integration in the classroom is a noble and necessary step on the path to ending discrimination against those with dis/abilities, it is only one part of the larger problem of exclusion and exile of those individuals who are considered the minority.

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks (2009) discusses issues that impact building an inclusive community. While she addresses racism specifically, much can be learned from hooks’ analyses and applied to the issues of segregation and integration of not just the classroom, but the community as well. At this point, we must recognize the need for the integration of people with dis/abilities fully into society. Bringing the stories of students, such as mine, into the studies conducted about their education, and its successes and failures, acknowledges their presence and brings them into the conversation about improving their situation.

If power produces knowledge, then when educating students with dis/abilities we must seize opportunities for exercising available power to spread a new knowledge, a knowledge of ability and strength to counteract the master-narrative that difference is deficit. One way to spread that knowledge is through the sharing of counternarratives. These narratives speak back against the master-narrative. The counternarrative of individuals with dis/abilities presents differences as assets and as part of our humanness. Authoring (writing, drawing, speaking, signing) their counternarrative gives a student agency over his/her own story. In addition, the sharing of these stories can encourage other students with dis/abilities to see value in their own experiences.

We must teach our students to wield their agency and take back their power. In our work alongside people with dis/abilities, we must consider Foucault’s (1980) advice to the intellectual, “[t]he project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis” (p. 62). Individuals with dis/abilities

can choose what issues to fight, the means with which they will battle, and the goal they are striving toward with the support of individuals who have access to and an understanding of the tools with which to deconstruct their experiences. A good life must be one where the individual is the master of his/her own bio-power and can use it to transform his/her life into the one he/she desires.

To begin to transform the socio-political geography of our world, we must first engage in a conversation about our experiences, those we share and those that are different. By collecting and presenting the counternarratives of students with dis/abilities in a rural public school, I am participating in that much needed conversation about equity for marginalized individuals. My work on this topic provides a necessary starting block for discussions of inclusion for students with “significant” cognitive dis/abilities. As Edward Soja (2010) explains,

Focusing in on specific examples of where and how (in)justice takes place helps to ground the search for spatial justice in socially produced contexts rather than letting it float in idealized abstractions and too easily deflected calls for universal human rights or radical revolution. (p. 31)

How quickly can we - teachers, parents, society as a whole - list all the problems with public education? These conversations take place on the nightly news, in the aisles of the grocery store, and in the hallways of schools across the nation. We all have ideas of how to make the educational process more effective and efficient. Some ideas are better than others, and some may even be considered great, but how often do those conversations turn into movements that change the landscape of education, and as a result, transform the lives of our children. When change does occur, it is slow in coming and usually driven by financial considerations, either the spending or receiving of funds, instead of a pursuit for enlightenment and equity.

### *Geography as Curriculum*

Inclusion is a major movement in special education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees that students with dis/abilities will be educated with students without dis/abilities to the greatest extent possible. What does this mean for students considered to have significant dis/abilities? To what extent can they be meaningfully educated in the general education setting, a standardized setting that provides a questionable learning environment for diverse students? If the general education classroom is potentially the best setting for all students with dis/abilities, then what changes are required to transform it into one that is conducive to their learning and supportive of their self-image?

To be successful, inclusion must be more than just the location of education, it must be a way of educating students. In “Changing Lanes: The Relationship Between Special Education Placement and Students’ Academic Futures,” Parekh and Brown (2018) examined a program of inclusion in Toronto District Schools and found it be largely unsuccessful in creating equitable educational opportunities for students. In this program, titled “home school program,” students spent 50% of their day with their homeroom peers and 50% of the day in a special education classroom. This half day inclusion program had two surprising outcomes. First, the total number of students educated in a self-contained setting actually increased. Second, though the students demonstrated increased achievement, they continued to experience decreased access to the courses required for post-secondary education.

In contrast, through the transformation of the structure of schooling, Memorial Elementary successfully created an inclusive setting for students with severe emotional and behavioral dis/abilities by creating a “practice of unconditional belonging” (Yoon, 2019, p. 421). In “Haunted Trauma Narratives of Inclusion, Race, and Disability in a School Community,”

Yoon (2019) explains, the school eliminated segregation by including all students in the general education classrooms, by “connecting families from vastly different neighborhoods,” and by welcoming students’ family members into the school (p. 428). The students were treated with trust and respect. High achievement was expected from all. This humanizing pedagogy created success in this environment, defined for these students as a disruption of the cycle of trauma of schooling through the labeling and rejecting of students, frequently male and African American, as emotionally and behaviorally dis/ordered.

Helfenbein’s (2004) proposed “radical geography of education” explores the transformation necessary to create such an inclusive environment that “seeks to both utilize and celebrate these moments of identity and freedom” (p. 73). The moments referenced here are “teachable moments” that Helfenbein (2004) defines as “interactions between bodies sharing a space” (p. 73). The freedom in these moments is the opportunity to create an educational space that recognizes the normalcy of difference. In these “teachable moments,” we can choose to teach acceptance and respect by valuing diversity in all of its forms. How can we cultivate such an inclusive space for students with dis/abilities? Helfenbein (2004) calls for us to change how we interpret power structures, such as the public-school system or the local school. As teachers and students, we are forced to work within unequal structures of power which seem to enslave us; however, we still have “the possibility for the expression of individuality and agency” (p. 70) in the space we create through our “teachable moments.”

The current repressive geography of education of students with dis/abilities emphasizes teaching vocational skills and modified academic content, not the knowledge producing “teachable moments” that occur in the excess, “the wilderness,” between the machine of education and the “teacher/student” where education expands in unexpected directions while

celebrating “bodies in the world” (Helfenbein, Jr., 2004, p. 71). This study seeks to expose the repressive geography of education within which my former students have struggled and to suggest qualities of a new transformative geography of education in which students with dis/abilities can thrive.

### **Curriculum Studies**

Within the intellectual conversation of curriculum studies, I have found a void in places where discussion could move easily from topics of inequitable practices based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality into topics of dis/ability. When considering issues of curriculum for students with dis/abilities, we must remember that often these students are being oppressed by the use of multiple socially undesirable labels connected to race, income, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. In “Through Space into the Flesh: Mapping Inscriptions of Anti-Black Racist and Ableist Schooling on Young People’s Bodies,” Krueger-Henney (2019) explains,

the purposes of US public education have always been tainted by a logic of ableism that uses individual racialized (especially ‘Black’) social, cognitive and physical attributes to determine who deserves to be in school, educated, and ultimately included as a productive member of US capitalist society. (p. 427)

When considering issues of the intersectionality of race and dis/ability, Annamma and Handy (2019) argue in their essay “DisCrit Solidarity as Curriculum Studies and Transformative Praxis” “that the field would benefit from a DisCrit conceptualization wherein classroom relationships are rooted in understanding the ways racism and ableism are built into how educators interpret intelligence and behaviour and are central to curricular commitments” (Annamma & Handy, 2019, p. 444). I have seen first-hand how race, gender, and class intersect to manifest dis/ability. African American students are disproportionately identified as having an

intellectual dis/ability (Jordan, 2005; Skiba et al., 2006). In the rural county in which I conducted my study, the school system had over-identified these students to the point that during the testing and eligibility process they could no longer identify any African American males as being intellectually dis/abled without incurring penalties and began assigning them other eligibilities, such as autism, to place them into special education.

Erevelles (2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2015, and 2017), one the most prolific scholars of curriculum studies doing work about dis/ability, bridges the space between disabilities studies and curriculum studies with essays that explore the intersections between race, class, gender, and ability. Other curriculum theorists important to this discussion include Helfenbein, Jr. (2004), Maudlin (2008), Snowber (2016), Springgay and Freedman (2008), and Swanson (2008). Other scholars whose work inform my theorization about curriculum for students with dis/abilities include Annamma (2018) and hooks (2009).

### ***Curriculum as De-normalization***

Difference is normal; standardization is de-normalizing. Schools try to eliminate differences in appearance, thought, and expression in an attempt to standardize and organize the population into a fitting work force. We often tell students to go to school, so they can get a good job, buy a house, and afford to raise a family, all in pursuit of the American dream of capitalization.

Even popular culture works toward this goal of standardization by promoting certain clothes and bodies as desirable seeking to imprint upon individuals certain ideas about their place in society, as well as who has value and who does not. In the essay “Life Goes On: Disability, Curriculum, and Popular Culture,” Julie Maudlin (2008) examines the presentation of dis/ability



in popular culture, specifically in one television show, “Life Goes On,” and two movies, *Forest Gump* and *Edward Scissorhands*. Maudlin’s discussion of the movies highlights the differing experiences of the two main characters. Forest, who has a “successful” experience with inclusion, embodies the ideal of individuals with dis/abilities being included into the mainstream population: “have an outwardly ‘normal’ appearance, are innocent and asexual, require no adaptations, and pose no threat to our own insecurities about ourselves” (Maudlin, 2008, p. 123). To be successful as a student with dis/abilities is to be “normal,” to learn without accommodations to standard instruction or modifications to grade-level standards.

In contrast, Edward’s experience is much different. His dis/ability is very apparent and hinders his ability to function in Suburbia. He solicits fear and pity, and his venture into society ends with a death. Edward’s experience conveys the idea that “those whose differences are beyond their control, should be kept in isolation. We comfort ourselves with the assumption that students with disabilities are better off not being exposed to the selfishness, maliciousness, and fearfulness of mainstream society” (Maudlin, 2008, p. 122). However, this attempt to protect students is a form of infantilism that denies those students the freedom to participate in mainstream school and society.

A segregated education is not an equal one, and students with dis/abilities, including my former students, deserve an appropriate education in the best setting, which should be inclusion. Unfortunately, the general education classroom can be an unwelcoming place that fails to meet the needs of learners with diverse abilities. With deeply held assumptions about students with dis/abilities permeating schools, they will continue to be outsiders receiving second-class instruction, even in the general education classroom.

In “Understanding Curriculum as Normalizing Text: Disability Studies Meet Curriculum Theory,” Erevelles (2005) revisits the idea of equity in education for students with dis/abilities by focusing on curriculum as a normalizing text. She discusses how education transforms children into the people society wants them to be through the information included in and excluded from the curriculum. In exploring the reason why this dyad of dis/ability / normality is used in education and curriculum, she revisits the impact of capitalism and the social division of labor on education. Erevelles (2005) explains, “[t]his logic, central to the organization of both education and the school curriculum, is invested in the support of normalizing discourses that are continuously at work to efface any signs of deviance/disability that serve to threaten the social order” (p. 433). The tenets of capitalism are clearly embedded in the way we “do” school. For seven hours a day, five days a week, children labor under the ever-watchful gaze of their supervisors (teachers). They are given 30 minutes for lunch and a short break (recess) at some point in the day. Those students who are highly productive and not disruptive of the group are praised and rewarded. While those students who fail to perform are usually reassigned to other positions (classrooms) in the school. Only certain students are singled out to stretch beyond the standard curriculum and express their creativity and develop their leadership skills (gifted and talented classes).

Considering these issues affecting the education of students with dis/abilities, how can equity in education become reality? Erevelles (2005) states that educators must “construct a curriculum in which disability is viewed as a critical part of the human condition rather than an abject manifestation of difference” (p. 435). She continues by explaining that the curriculum should encourage “all students to negotiate difference in creative ways that foster co-operation and interdependence rather than competition and radical individualism” (p. 436). This new

curriculum would also “require the desegregation of both special and regular educational tracks, the re-evaluation of out-moded assessment measures, the reorganization of the curriculum to include the history, experiences, and scholarship of persons with disabilities” (p. 436). Building upon her work, I propose an embodied curriculum that not only requires the inclusion of students with dis/abilities, but also recognizes their value in producing knowledge.

### ***Embodied Curriculum***

What is an embodied curriculum? Stephanie Springgay and Debra Freedman (2008), the editors of *Curriculum and the Cultural Body*, and authors of “Introduction: On Touching and a Bodied Curriculum,” explain the idea of a bodied curriculum by stating, “where the inter-embodiment between self and other performs curriculum as difference” (p. xxi). This idea is compelling to me as an alternative to the de-normalizing curriculum currently in our schools. If “through inter-embodiment [curriculum] questions, examines, and provokes the particularities of different bodies” (Springgay & Freedman, 2008, p. xxiii), then instead of seeing dis/ability and normality as opposites, students can learn that difference is not only natural, but can be an asset, as well.

Also, in *Curriculum and the Cultural Body* is a work by Dalene Swanson (2008) “Silent Voices, Silent Bodies: Difference and Disadvantage in Schooling Contexts.” In this chapter, she utilizes narrative excerpts from her dissertation research to theorize the embodied curriculum. Swanson (2008) explains, “I explore the multiple articulations of the body as it finds place within the paradoxes, dilemmas and ambiguities produced through discursive and embodied productions and ideological performances within localized contexts, in particular - contexts of poverty” (p. 64). Within the context of poverty, Swanson explores the socio-political construction of disadvantage and difference on the body and possible sites of resistance. I used

this text to inform my work by analyzing my former students' counternarratives within the context of dis/ability.

In addition, Swanson's (2008) text further inspires me with her description of a "pedagogy of heart." This pedagogy "privilege[es] the emotive and spiritual over cognitive or intellectual" (p. 69). When imagining an appropriate curriculum not only for students with dis/abilities, but for all students, it is guided by this idea of a holistic and hopeful curriculum. I also want to approach my research with my former students with a "pedagogy of heart" by respecting their "embodied ways of knowing" and the emotional elements of their educational experiences.

The effects of the standard curriculum on the embodied state of students with dis/abilities is perfectly captured by Celeste Snowber's (2016) in *Embodied Inquiry: Writing, Living and Being through the Body*. She states,

For too long the body has been looked at as an object, as if from the outside. The body has been colonized, gendered, politicized, medicalized and consumerized. We have for too long bullied the body to look a certain way, be a certain way, or act a certain way. (p. xiii)

This treatment of the body causes an internal divide between the self and the body, with its experiences and expressions. However, this is a false separation, because our self, our identity, our truth, are one with our body and shaped by our interactions with the world through that body. How others treat us and the opportunities available or denied to us are often based on the appearance of our self, generated by our body, interacting with the preconceived prejudices of other people. Those experiences shape the development and understanding of our identity, of our self. A different body would provoke a different set of interactions, generating different

experiences, that would result in the development of a different identity. Therefore, the self and the body are a single unit, and when the body is “colonized, gendered, politicized, medicalized and consumerized,” then so is the self. To free the self/body from this persecution, the body must be empowered, so the self can become *embodied* to speak the knowledge originating from the body’s interaction in/on the world.

An example of this colonization of body is analyzed by Subini Annamma (2018) in “Mapping Consequential Geographies in the Carceral State: Education Journey Mapping as a Qualitative Method With Girls of Color With Dis/abilities.” Annamma’s study examines the educational journey of girls of color currently incarcerated in the Juvenile Justice Department. One of the participants, Tristen (pseudonym), explains that she loved school at first, but then she started to struggle in middle school. She began to believe that she was bad at school. This fear was confirmed by her principal who told her that she was stupid, a self-fulfilling prophesy that ultimately contributed to her failure at school (Annamma, 2018). Tristen’s identity as a student was transformed by her experiences. Had her educational environment valued students of color, her experiences would have been much different. Her identity as a good student could have been preserved. She could have continued to see school as a refuge, a place of hope and opportunity, and may have never entered the Juvenile Justice Department.

An embodied curriculum for students with dis/abilities requires creating a culture of belonging in their local public schools. In her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks (2009)

pay[s] tribute to the past as a resource that can serve as a foundation for us to revision and renew our commitment to the present, to making a world where all people can live fully and well, where everyone can belong. (p. 5)

hooks speaks here of the influences of racism; however, her message can easily be applied to issues of acceptance for individuals with dis/abilities. The past educational experiences of students with dis/abilities establishes a clear pattern of seclusion and exclusion. Now is the time to reimagine education into a democratic practice, one that includes all students, regardless of race, gender, ability, socio-political class, or sexuality.

With the current movement in education toward increased inclusion of students with dis/abilities, we must reflect on the success of other similar educational movements, desegregation in particular. Though desegregation was legislated, and eventually implemented, in public schools, the us/then mentality of racism has persisted to this day and is evident in White Flight and the underfunding of schools that primarily serve African American children. hooks (2009) explains that the “focus on desegregation without anti-racist thought and behavior did not help create a safe context wherein bonding across racial difference could be seen as both necessary for progress and appealing” (p. 74). Merely legislating that students with dis/abilities be served in the least restrictive environment and requiring more inclusion will not foster healthy effective educational communities. Pushing these students into educational environments where they are viewed as outsiders will breed bullying, misunderstanding, resentment, and discouragement. No one benefits in this environment. The teacher is overworked. The students with dis/abilities are not getting an education appropriate to their needs, and the other students are being taught to accept, overlook, and excuse injustice and inequality. However, as hooks (2009) states,

when we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive, it need not matter whether those spaces are diverse. What matters is that should difference

enter the world of beloved community it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong. (p. 183)

A “beloved community” that fosters both a “pedagogy of heart” and an “embodied curriculum” embraces diversity and recognizes difference as a natural asset. The educational experiences are respectful of the whole child and emphasize collaboration over competition. To truly transform the classroom, the culture of the entire school must be remade. In addition to the classroom, the “beloved community” must extend into the lunchroom, onto the playground, and into the teachers’ work room.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

For this study, I chose to use counternarratives to emphasize the difference in my participants' stories and those of the master-narrative. This work speaks back against the belief that individuals labeled with cognitive dis/abilities are unable to describe their experiences or to participate in research about their experiences. Their stories dispute the master-narrative that an education separate from their grade level peers is both necessary and equitable. My methodological framework builds on the work of scholars in counternarrative inquiry, such as Bell (1999); Delgado (1989); He & Ayers (2009); He & Ross (2015); He, Ross, & Seay (2015); Solórzano & Yosso (2002). In consideration of the special population I am working with, I draw on the current arts-based research being done with children with dis/abilities, including Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova (2016); Søndergaard & Reventlow (2019); Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, (2015); Maxwell (2006). I was also inspired by the work of arts-based research scholars Barone & Eisner (2006); Coles (1992); also Bae-Dimitriadis (2020).

This study seeks to improve the educational experiences of students considered, by their school system, to have “significant” dis/abilities by asking, “How do students with a mild intellectual dis/ability experience education in a self-contained setting?” The special education services received by students under the eligibility of mild intellectual dis/ability can vary based on the school system and the needs of the student. Some of these students remain in the general education setting with a special educator coming into their classroom to provide support. In other cases, the student may be pulled out of the general education classroom for part of the day during



certain subjects. Those students placed in the most restrictive special education setting are educated solely in the self-contained classroom.

As I stated in my introduction, research should not be conducted *on* individuals with dis/abilities. Research about their lives should be conducted *by* or *with* them. My inquiry seeks to explore the effect of the self-contained classroom on students with a mild intellectual dis/ability by collecting stories from three of my former students about their positive and negative educational experiences. I worked with the participants during my four years teaching the elementary GAA class in a rural county in Georgia. These students were the ones who arrived at school each day on segregated buses. They were ejected from class after class during their earliest years of schooling. They were not welcome in the library, art room, cafeteria, or playground. They were the ones from which little was expected and even less was given.

While cognitive deficits and communication delays impact my former students' ability to process and express ideas as fluently as their middle and high school peers, their insights are both valid and valuable. One exemplary study that has demonstrated the ability of young children to think critically about the world around them was conducted by Vivian Maria Vasquez. In *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, Vasquez (2008) discusses her yearlong curriculum of critical literacy in a half-day program of 3 to 5-year-olds. Through conversation and the analysis of stories and images her students explored such issues as ecology, gender, diversity, equity, animal rights, advertisement, and charity. They did more than just discuss these issues, they participated in social justice work through letter writing campaigns and recorded their new understandings through drawing and writing. Like many of my students, Vasquez's students did not read or write fluently and were just being to develop their verbal expression; however, they were able to engage in a critical analysis of society, and its influence

on both themselves and individuals different from them, and then pursue social justice goals to improve the world at large. Vasquez's work inspired me to conduct this study with my former students and to explore through drawing and conversation how they experience their education and what suggestions they have for improving it.

### **Rationale for Study Design**

#### **Counternarrative Inquiry**

I chose to use arts-based educational research (ABER) in this study to enhance the readers' perspective of this phenomenon and "to broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practice by calling attention to seemingly commonsensical, taken-for-granted notions" (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96). In this study, I want to challenge the perspective that dis/ability denotes deficit and that students with cognitive dis/abilities benefit from being educated in the self-contained classroom by presenting the counter perspective of those students. As Barone and Eisner (2006) explain, by "adopting 'foreign' perspectives, consumers of ABER texts may come to question the actual effect of – and so perhaps to rethink – entrenched educational practice and policy" (p. 98). Through the use of counternarrative inquiry, my intention is to invite readers into the 'foreign' perspective of students with dis/abilities educated in the self-contained classroom to encourage questioning the notion that this educational environment is the best one in which to educate these students.

Arising from the work of critical race theorists, counter-storytelling provides a method of confronting the master-narrative for individuals whose stories are rarely told. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, "counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (p. 32). Derrick Bell is one of the prominent scholars of critical race theory presenting narratives of racially marginalized people

for this purpose. Bell (1999) states, “stories are in many ways more powerful than litigation or brief-writing and may be necessary precursors to law reform. They offer insights into the particulars of life lived at the margins of society” (p. 317). Often this life is one rarely witnessed by outsiders. When presented in popular culture, such as movies and television shows, their stories are usually told from the majoritarian perspective. This perspective prioritizes deficit over ability and despair over hope.

This master-narrative of society told by the majority works to propagate social division and repression by presenting its narrative as natural and not the result of systemic and institutional discrimination. Storytelling is an integral part of building that mindset. As Delgado (1989) explains,

for stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understanding, and meaning. The stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural. (p. 2412)

For this reason, counternarratives are essential for breaking the mindset created by the master narrative. They not only present ‘foreign’ perspectives but can also reveal possibilities of new realities. In “An Anticolonial Land-Based Approach to Urban Place: Mobile Cartographic Stories by Refugee Youth,” Bae-Dimitriadis (2020) used counternarrative to expose exclusionary practices in their city. She explains,

By (re)writing new spatial stories, individuals can resist the notion that who they are is defined by where they are. [I]t is necessary to question and reveal missing stories in the production of a space as well as the hegemonic colonial system’s concealment of sites of

resistance, subversion, pain, struggle, love, and reimagination. (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2020, p. 113)

Through the creation of their counternarratives, my students can reject the story told *about* them as students in a self-contained classroom and replace it with one told *by* them.

As educational research, the use of counternarrative as a method toward social justice is being seen in the field of Curriculum Studies. This study contributes to the field by building on the works of scholars such as He & Ayers (2009); He & Ross (2015); and He, Ross, & Seay (2015). In “Research with a Heart: Activist Practitioner Inquiry on the Landscape of Diversity,” He and Ayers (2009) discuss the use of narrative and counternarrative in educational research to access the complex nature of human experiences. In “Narrative of Curriculum in the South: Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, and Power,” He and Ross (2012) use counternarratives as a way to “challenge traditional ways of engaging in and interpreting curriculum research and affirm the significance of curriculum inquiry as a form of liberatory or radical democratic practice” (p. 1). In “Methodological Dilemmas in Social Justice Research in the U.S. South,” He, Ross, and Seay (2015) discuss the methodological tensions that arise from the use of social justice inquiry in the U.S. south due to the persistent oppression of marginalized groups.

In the case of this study, the counternarratives are used to challenge acceptance of the curriculum of exclusion for students with cognitive dis/abilities with the intention of suggesting the need of educational reform for these students. The complexity of their educational experiences is explored through drawing and interviews. The point of view of these students is rarely invited or considered, even when their IEP (Individual Education Plan) committee members meet to make academic and vocational decisions for the upcoming year. This

opportunity for them to share their thoughts and feelings about the education they receive provides them with a platform that prioritizes their experiential knowledge above social assumption and expectation.

### **Collecting Stories through Drawing and Interviewing**

Much research has been done with children and their drawings. Robert Coles, a child psychologist, has been doing work with children through their drawings for decades. Coles (1992) explains,

Often children don't want to talk very much; often there are barriers of race and class, of language, which separate doctors (or teachers) like me from those we want to get to know; often, even in the midst of the intimacy of psychiatric and psychoanalytic work with boys and girls, a spell of grim, unyielding silence or suspicion or aloofness takes hold - hence the great alternative and opportunity of drawing, painting, together. (p. vi)

Just because a child is unwilling or unable to clearly express their thoughts and feelings in a manner that is easily accessible to an adult with vastly different life experiences and use of language, does not mean that their thoughts and feelings are absent or unimportant. Children have a rich inner life which is evident in their play and use of imagination. Their artwork can provide a meaningful glimpse into this inner world. Already having a rapport with my students, sealed by the receipt of innumerable previous expressions of art and life, this method of collecting my students' stories should be quite effective.

Internationally work is taking place using the drawings of children with dis/abilities in research studies. Quite recently in Denmark, Søndergaard and Reventlow used drawing as a tool to examine how parental illness affects children. In this study, they asked the children to draw 2

opposing pictures, one of a good day and one of a bad day. Søndergaard and Reventlow (2019) explain that

the method helps the children communicate a more detailed perspective, compared to them only being asked to draw one of the two situations. The aim was to explore the widest possible range of meanings related to the everyday life and family life of our child respondents, and the method served this purpose. (p. 4)

This is the method I use in my study to support my participants in sharing their experiences. Søndergaard and Reventlow (2019) also discuss the importance of analyzing the data in the context. They state,

drawings cannot be analyzed separately from the other data in the project. They must be understood along with the explanations that the children provided during the process and in light of the contextual understanding that emerges from other parts of the fieldwork. (p. 8)

This assertion emphasizes the importance of analyzing the drawings with consideration to the children's explanations of the drawings.

In the United Kingdom, Maxwell used drawing with primary aged children with special needs to examine their views about school. In this study, he also employed the technique of 'a drawing and its opposite.' Maxwell (2006) explains,

the process of using polarity helps to transcend a single or original drawing and can point to possible concerns in relation to the child's experience of themselves and their circumstances.... A statement made by the child needs to be seen in the context of 'its opposite' and it thereby takes on more precise meaning with what it both implies and denies. (p. 21)

Here again, the researcher also emphasizes the importance of context in determining the meaning of the drawings.

In Russia, as part of a national movement to support children without parents through foster placements, a study was conducted to determine how a foster child with dis/abilities experiences the world when given a new placement. As part of this study, researchers used the Kinetic Family Portrait technique. This technique requires that the participant draws all members of the household, including himself/herself, engaging in activity. The drawings are scored using set criteria which reveal the degree of family unity experienced by the participant. The researchers reinforce the idea that through drawing the child communicates important information about how he/she is experiencing the world. They state that when

drawing a person, the author identifies himself/herself with this image to some extent, that is why significant functions and conflicts, connected with particular parts of body, are revealed when drawing not only himself but also other members of the family.

(Aslamazova, Yurina, Kochendova, & Krasnova, 2016, p. 1757)

In Australia, Deakin University, Save the Children, the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association, and the PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons published a guide to conducting research with children with dis/abilities. Their guide examines “key principles and ethics that need to be considered when conducting research with children with dis/ability and introduces the tools and method for their use” (Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campaign, & Stockman, 2015, p. 2). Included in this guide is a section on the use of drawing. They assert that “[t]here is no one right way to do this process” (Jenkin et al., 2015, p. 37). They recommend that researchers ask questions about the picture either during or after drawing, prompt the participants to elaborate on their answers, “[t]ake notes on everything they tell you,” “[l]eave the original

drawing with the child,” and “be positive about the child’s drawings and what they are telling you” (Jenkin et al., 2015, p. 37).

These studies have informed the design of my own study. I use the technique of drawing to “draw” out the ideas and experiences of my participants. The method of a drawing with its opposite provides depth to the exploration of my participants’ educational experiences. As many of the researchers noted, the drawings alone are an insufficient source of data; therefore, I conducted a semi-structured interview. The drawings must be analyzed in the context of the reflections of the participants, which not only checks the accuracy of my analysis of the drawings, but also adheres to the ideals of treating individuals with dis/abilities with respect by allowing them space to communicate, explain, and/or analyze their own experiences.

### **Study Design**

My participants are students with dis/abilities who were in my self-contained elementary classroom for at least one year between 2012 and 2016. Students in a self-contained classroom are excluded from general education instruction and their non-disabled grade level peers. They are taught a modified form of the grade level curriculum, as well as several adaptive behaviors, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, fine and gross motor dexterity, and interviewing/employability skills.

During the time that they were in my classroom, each student invited to participate in this study was considered to have a Mild Intellectual Disability (MID). According to the Georgia Department of Education, to be eligible for special education services under the category of Mild Intellectual Disability the student must meet the following criteria:

- (1) Intellectual functioning ranging between an upper limit of approximately 70 to a lower limit of approximately 55; and



(2) Deficits in adaptive behavior that significantly limit a child's effectiveness in meeting the standards of maturation, learning, personal independence or social responsibility, and especially school performance that is expected of the individual's age level and cultural group, as determined by clinical judgment. (Georgia Department of Education, 2010)

In addition to an intellectual dis/ability, my students often had secondary or tertiary eligibilities, such as speech impairment, autism, OHI (Other Health Impairment – including Down syndrome and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), cerebral palsy, and EBD (Emotional and Behavioral Disorder). Though the specific composition of my class changed often, I consistently had more boys than girls, more children of low socio-economic status, and more African American than Caucasian children.

In my planning for this study, I have attempted to choose a group of students that would represent this diversity. I began with a pool of ten students. To eliminate the need to go through the school to contact or recruit participants, I choose to invite students to participate only if I already had contact information for their parents. These were the parents and students who I communicated with regularly, and who I believed would be interested in participating. When I attempted to contact my participants, I discovered that several of the phone numbers I had were no longer correct. I was able to speak with the parents of six potential participants. Four of those parents gave consent for their child to participate in the study. However, one of the participants did not attend the scheduled interview and did not reply to my subsequent attempts to contact him.

## **Participant Profiles**

In this study, I include the stories of three of my former students. Since I was their teacher, they have grown from elementary to middle and high school students. For the purposes of this study, I used the following pseudonyms for my participants: Kara, Alvin, and Derek.

### ***Kara***

Kara is a Caucasian female. She is slim, almost delicate looking, but she is as tall as her mother and very proud of her long brown hair. At the time of the interview, she was receiving special education services under the eligibility of mild intellectual dis/ability as a rising high school freshman. Kara's primary mode of communication is verbal. She typically responds with single words or 3 to 4 word phrases. She is capable of longer utterances about topics of particular interest to her. For the purposes of this study, Kara communicated through her drawing and by answering questions either with a short verbal phrase and/or gesturing (movement of hands or head).

### ***Alvin***

Alvin is an African American male. He is tall and athletically built. At the time of the interview, he was receiving special education services under the eligibilities of autism, mild intellectual dis/ability, and speech impairment as a rising high school freshman. However, his mom had decided to transition him to homeschool. Alvin's primary mode of communication is verbal. He usually responds to questions with a 1 to 2 word answer. For the purposes of this study, Alvin communicated through his drawing and by answering questions either with a short verbal phrase and/or gesturing (movement of hands or head).

### ***Derek***

Derek is an African American male. He appears small for his age and almost painfully thin. At the time of the interview, he was receiving special education services under the eligibility of mild intellectual dis/ability for his second year at the middle school. Derek's primary mode of communication is verbal. He readily answers questions, but occasionally struggles to stay on topic. For the purposes of this study, Derek communicated through his drawing and by verbally answering questions.

### **Research Procedures**

For this study, the participants were asked to draw and discuss pictures about their educational experiences. Interviews with Kara and Derek were conducted at their respective homes. Alvin's interview was conducted at the local park. For each interview, a parent was present and available to provide information about the participant's educational history. Each participant was provided with white paper, pencils, and crayons to complete one drawing about a positive educational experience and one drawing about a negative educational experience. After completing the drawings, they each answered questions about the drawings, their educational experiences in general, and how those experiences could be improved. An audio recording was made of each interview.

As part of my research, I have kept field journals. During the interviews, I made notes about behavior, body language, and facial expression, as well as my impressions about the interview in general. As I analyzed the drawings and interview transcripts, I made additional notes about my insights and the ideas that arose from that analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

For this study, my sources of data are the counternarratives told by my participants through drawings and interviews. I examined the drawings by noting what people, places, and activities are represented in the positive and negative experiences. I looked for commonalities in the drawings of all the participants. I analyzed these commonalities and the participants' explanations of their experiences to determine what themes arise from the data. In the following chapter, I will explore those themes in a discussion about how these students have experienced their education of exclusion.

## **Challenges for My Research**

Every study has limitations, mine is no different. One challenge that emerged during this study was a difficulty in contacting the parents of my former students. Teachers often struggle to maintain consistent contact with parents throughout a single school year due to phone lines becoming disconnected or numbers being changed. Since it had been four years since I had been in contact with these parents, I found many of the numbers I had for my students' parents were no longer in use. I was able to successfully reach the parents of six of my former students and complete interviews with three of them. Therefore, I utilized a small sample size for my study due to the small population of individuals available to participate. However, with the small number of participants, I was able to focus intensely on the rich presentations and descriptions of participants' experiences.

One unexpected challenge that I encountered during this study was the need for social distancing due to COVID-19. One of the parents I spoke with was understandably uncomfortable with a face-to-face meeting, but not familiar enough with technology to meet virtually. While two of the parents were comfortable with us meeting at their homes, two parents requested a

meeting in a public venue (one of these parents later changed her mind about participating in the study). Since the public library and local restaurants were closed, these meetings were scheduled to take place at the city park. Unfortunately, the park had no covered seating and was uncomfortably hot in June, even in the morning, and especially while wearing a mask.

## CHAPTER 4

### COUNTERNARRATIVES

In this chapter, I present the counternarratives of my participants. For each participant, in the background section, I provide a brief sketch of the participant's special education services. I include information about how they were initially referred for services, what services they received when I worked with them, and the services they are currently receiving. The information in this section comes from my experience as their teacher and from the parent interview.

After presenting the background information, I then share the participant's counternarratives. Each participant completed two drawings to represent how they experience their education. The first drawing was of a positive educational experience. The second drawing was about a negative educational experience. Participants were not restricted to illustrating a single event. They were encouraged to represent, through their art, what in their educational situation is uplifting and encouraging when creating the first drawing, and what is frustrating or discouraging for the second drawing. For each drawing, I include the details from the participant interview about that piece.

#### **Kara**

##### **Interview Setting**

Kara lives down a short gravel driveway, shared with several family members, not far down a side road off a state highway. Her father explained that his father and uncles had collectively purchased the 100 acre plot before he was born. Though his uncles had purchased and lived in trailers, his father built the home in which they still live with his own hands. Before beginning his own family, Kara's father had added an in-door bathroom to the house.

Driving up to the house, I noticed its neatly kept lawn, trampoline and chicken coop. When I exited my car, I was met by Kara's parents on the front porch. They warmly invited me into their home and proudly shared with me its history. I was delighted to be updated on the lives of Kara and her older brother, who had also received services in the self-contained special education classroom. Kara's mother sat with Kara and me at the kitchen table during the interview, and her father and brother sat in the living room watching television.

While Kara was drawing, I completed her mother's part of the interview. Her mother is a very jovial and friendly person. She openly shared with me small details of Kara's life that I include in the background section to provide a richer description of who Kara is, outside of the identity prescribed to her by the school.

### **Background**

At the time of her interview, Kara, a Caucasian female, was 15 years old and preparing to enter high school. She has been receiving special education services since she was in Head Start. Her teacher saw that Kara was behind her classmates and referred her for evaluation. Kara was a student in my classroom from 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade under the eligibility mild intellectual dis/ability. At that time, she received small group instruction in the self-contained classroom, speech services, and adaptive physical education. Since then, she "graduated" from speech services when she met her goals. Kara's current services include small group instruction in the self-contained classroom as a student with a mild intellectual dis/ability. She has no medical diagnoses or health concerns.

As she worked on her drawing, Kara often looked up at her mother or me with an uncertain smile. I recognized this smile from the classroom. Kara always tried her best to please those around her. When completing assignments or following directions (such as put your

notebook on the round table), she would often stop and look for someone to confirm that what she was doing was right. Once given confirmation, she would complete the task with a broad smile and quick flap of her hands near her face. During the interview, both her mother and I provided her verbal encouragement, as seen in the following excerpt from the interview transcript:

**Interviewer:** ... on our first drawing, I want you to give me a good learning experience at school. Something that makes you happy, something that you enjoy when you're learning.

**Kara's Mom:** I'll look this way, so you... (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** It can be any place with any people that you enjoy learning with.

**Kara's Mom:** Don't feel bad. I ain't no good artist either so I can't draw either (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** That's what I've always told them in class. That's not one of my strengths....

(Kara begins drawing.)

(Kara stops drawing and smiles uncertainly at the interviewer.)

**Interviewer:** You're doing fine. (Kara drops her pencil and it rolls across the table.) I've got it sweetheart. I'm going get out the crayons, there, for whenever you're ready for them.

(Kara resumes drawing.)

**Interviewer:** You're doing good. It looks good.

**Kara's Mom:** (laughter)

(Kara pauses again in her drawing and looks at the interviewer.)

**Interviewer:** You're okay. It's fine.



**Kara's Mom:** (laughter)

**Interviewer:** You're doing good. You're doing good.

(Kara resumes drawing.) (personal communication, June 19, 2020)

Her mother commented that she hopes Kara will one day grow out of her shyness, as she did. With a laugh she revealed that when Kara's watching wrestling with her brother, she often yells encouragement to her favorite wrestlers. Kara shared that she likes the "good guys," Roman Reigns and Drew McIntyre. Mom explains she did not expect Kara to like wrestling, but she would often watch her brother watching it and then began playing wrestling video games with him. When commenting on wrestling Kara's answers are longer and more confident, than when answering questions about her drawings, as seen here:

**Kara's Mom:** She might outgrow the shyness one day. I eventually did, so maybe she will. (chuckle) When she's in there with [her brother] watching wrestling, she's all into it like he is. They're in there yelling, "Don't do that. Get up. Don't let him pin you."

**Kara's Mom and Interviewer:** (laughter)

**Kara:** I actually like their talking.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Kara's Mom:** There's this wrestler that they don't like but I always pick at them, and what's his name? Barry...

**Kara:** Baron Corbin. [laughter] He's a bad guy.

**Kara's Mom:** He's a bad guy?

**Interviewer:** He's the bad guy?

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Oh. Who's the good guy?

**Kara's Mom:** Is Seth a good one or...

**Kara:** No, he ain't good anymore.

**Kara's Mom:** Oh. Seth ain't good. No. Roman Reigns is one of the good ones.

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Kara's Mom:** But he's not...

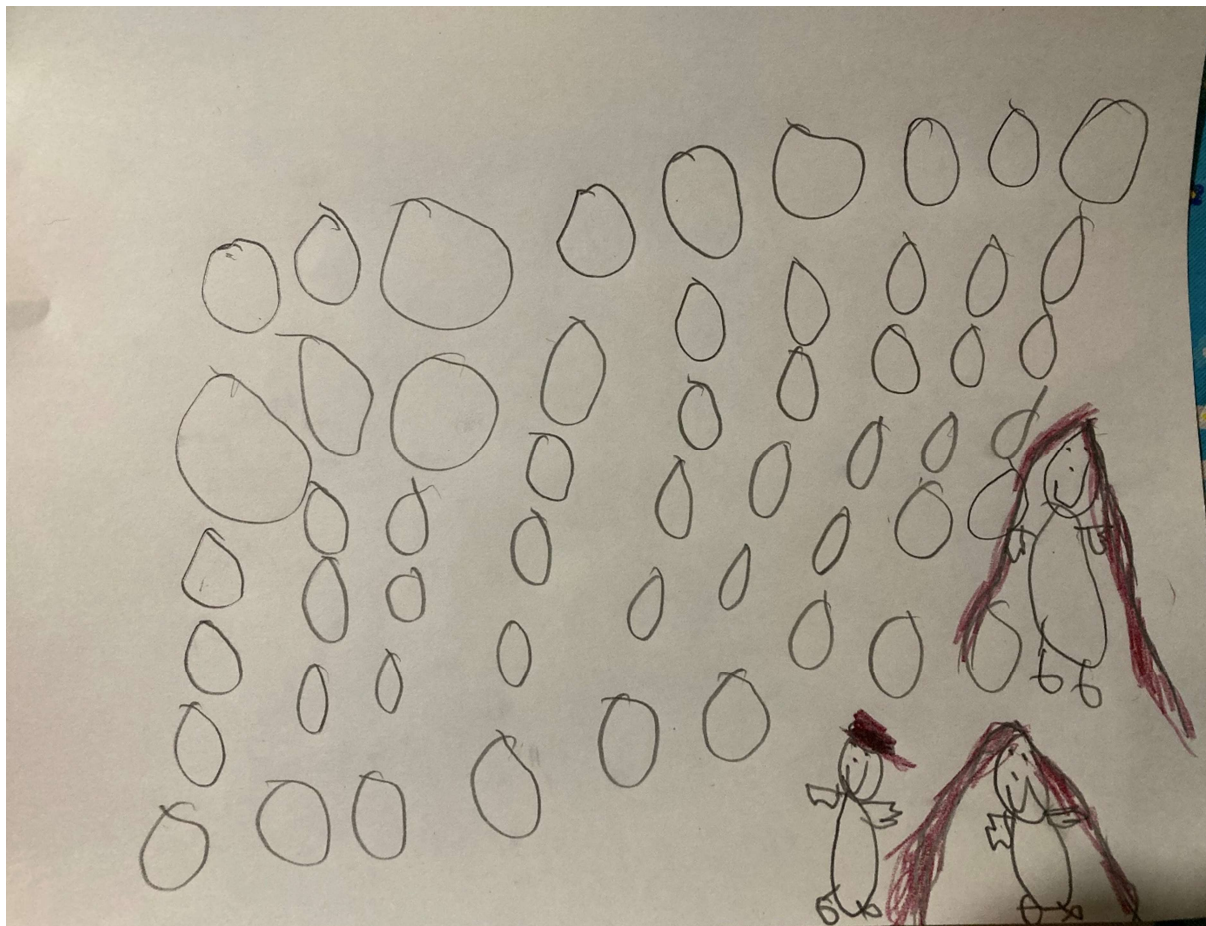
**Kara:** And Drew McIntyre.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Alright. (personal communication, June 19, 2020)

## Counternarrative

### Figure 1

*Kara's Positive Educational Experience*



Kara's explanation of her drawing follows:

**Interviewer:** You want to add any more details to your drawing?

**Kara:** No.

**Kara's Mom:** You got plenty of colors there.

**Interviewer:** You want to add some color to it? (Kara successfully uses the twistable crayons.) Good job. You remember how they work.

(Kara begins coloring her hair in the drawing.)

**Interviewer:** Is that your long, brown hair. (Kara nods.) Yeah?

(Kara completes the coloring of her hair in the drawing.)

**Interviewer:** Alright. You done?

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Alright, so tell me, where are you in this picture?

**Kara:** Right there.

(Kara points to herself in the drawing.)

**Interviewer:** Okay, so what are you doing in the picture? (Kara mimes dribbling a basketball.) Playing basketball.

**Kara and Kara's Mom:** (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you're in the gym?

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And are all of those circles basketballs?

**Kara:** (nods) (laughs)

**Interviewer:** Alright. Who's with you in the picture?

**Kara:** Coach L.

**Interviewer:** Coach L? Okay? And who else?

**Kara Mom:** The other coach?

**Kara:** Yeah

**Kara's Mom:** W, Coach W

**Interviewer:** Okay. What about this makes it good or fun, that makes you happy?

**Kara:** Fun.

**Interviewer:** That is fun? What do you learn when you play basketball?

**Kara:** Mmmmm.

**Kara's Mom:** Do you learn to dribble or throw or pass?

**Kara:** (Mimes dribbling.)

**Interviewer:** Dribbling, okay.

**Kara's Mom:** I know she used to... Whenever she would put on a dress and I forget to pack her tennis shoes for gym, she would get mad, because she wouldn't be able to participate.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Kara:** That was one time.

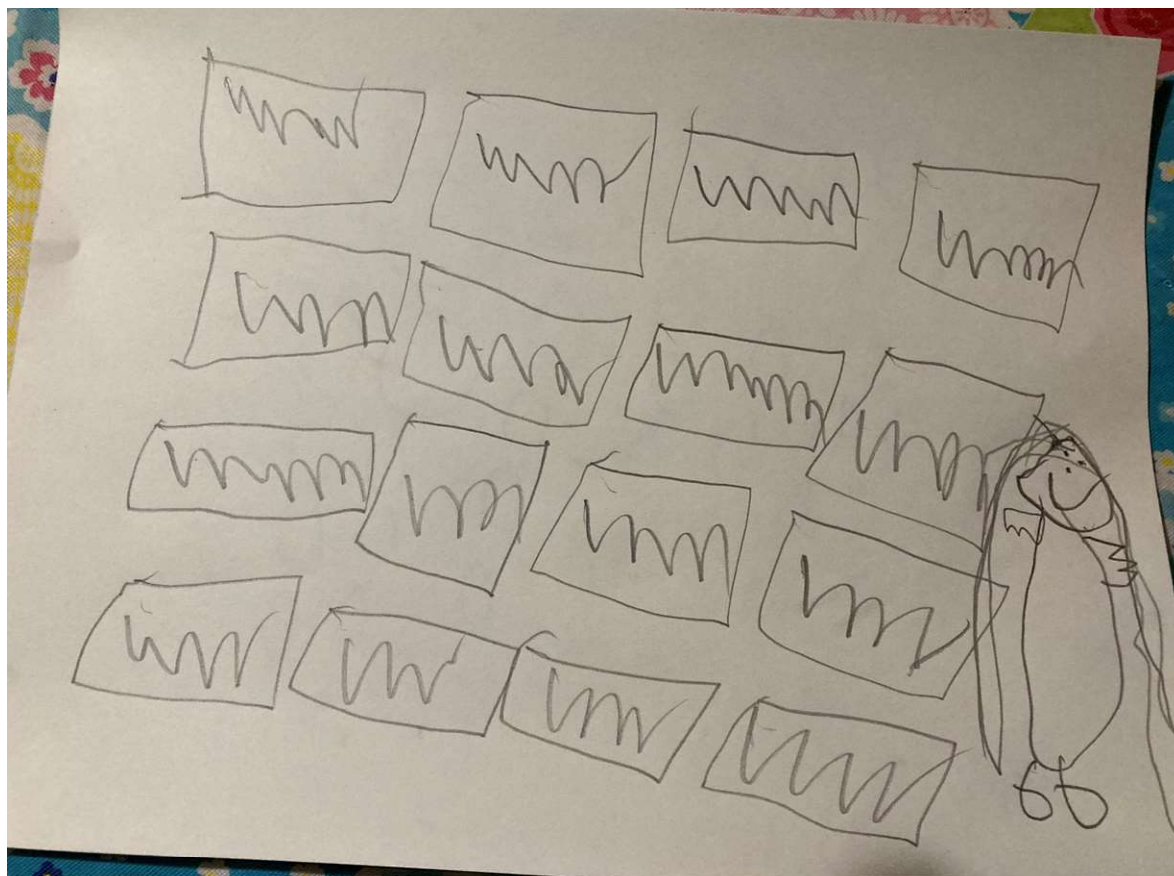
**Kara's Mom:** Well, I know it was just the one time, but I won't forget that you were mad that day because you couldn't participate.

**Interviewer and Kara's Mom:** (laughter)

**Kara's Mom:** I didn't even think nothing about that day when I sent her in a dress and forgot to send her tennis shoes with her. (personal communication, June 19, 2020)

## Figure 2

*Kara's Negative Educational Experience*



When prompted to draw a picture showing a negative experience, Kara immediately said, “working.” Her discussion of her drawing follows:

**Interviewer:** Alright, are you done or are you still working?

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** You done? (Kara nods.) Oh. So where are you in this picture?

**Kara:** Working.

**Interviewer:** You're working. So are you in your classroom at school? (Kara nods.)

Okay. What kind of work are you doing?

**Kara:** Math.

**Interviewer:** Math, okay. Okay. Alright. So tell me what about this makes it not fun?

Why is it that you don't like to do this as much?

(pause)

**Kara:** (shrugs)

**Interviewer:** You don't know? Okay.

**Kara's Mom:** Is it hard or is it too much?

**Kara:** Too much.

**Interviewer:** Too much? Okay. So what could your teacher do to change it so that it would be more fun for you? If you could ask your teacher to do anything to change to make it different for you, could you think of anything? (Kara shakes her head no.) Okay, she...

**Kara's Mom:** Give less work, give easier work, maybe give a prize or something, or a snack?

**Interviewer:** Let you work with your friends, let you move around and work, what kind of things you think would make it a little bit more fun for you?

**Kara:** Work with everyone.

**Interviewer:** Work with everyone? Okay. So when you do your work at school, you usually sit by yourself and work by yourself?

**Kara:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Alright, so you said you're working on math in the picture, is there any subject that you like? Reading or science or social studies?

(No response from Kara.)

**Kara's Mom:** (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** Or you can say no if you don't like any of them.

**Kara:** No.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Kara's Mom:** (laughter) I was a science person, I love science.

**Interviewer:** I love to read and the experiments that we did in science class. Hopefully you'll get to do some experiments in science at the high school that'll make you like that.

**Kara's Mom:** Maybe something like biology. That was fun.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so let's see, math. What kind of math work are you doing in your picture?

**Kara's Mom:** Are you doing adding, subtracting, counting money?

**Kara:** Adding.

**Interviewer:** Adding? Okay. Is there something in math that you do like to do? (Kara shrugs.) Or is there something that you do in math that helps you? So, if your teacher gives you like blocks and things to use or lets you move around to do your math work, or lets you work with a partner, does any of that help it?

**Kara:** A partner. (personal communication, June 19, 2020)

### **Preliminary Reflections**

Differences between Kara's positive and negative experiences were evident in her drawings and interview. Her positive experiences were illustrated with a greater number of objects and people, and she used more color. Watching her work and seeing the result gave me the feeling that she did not want to linger in her negative experience long enough to add additional details such as color. In her positive experience, Kara colored everyone's hair. While in her negative experience, she used no color. In her positive experience, Kara drew 54 basketballs. While in her negative experience, she only drew 16 math assignments. In addition, her positive experience included her two coaches, but in her negative experience, she was alone

in the picture. Kara drew herself playing basketball in the gym (a collaborative activity in a place of greater inclusion) for her positive experience and completing a math assignment in the classroom (an independent activity in a place of greater exclusion) for her negative experience. Though she was smiling in both pictures, as I had seen her smiling most of her time in the classroom, the negative experience imparted a feeling of isolation to me, since she chose not to draw her teachers or classmates. When asked how to change the negative experience to a positive one, she suggested working with a partner to complete her work.

## **Alvin**

### **Interview Setting**

I arranged to meet with Alvin and his mother at the city park. The park is a narrow green space approximately one block long situated between two historic downtown streets. The space has a caboose at one end, to commemorate the community's agricultural history, and a tableless covered pavilion at the other end. We chose to meet at 10:00 am hoping to avoid the summer heat. We conducted the interview at one of the few picnic tables, none of which were located under any shade. While Alvin worked on his pictures, his mother completed her part of the interview and shared with me some details of his life that will be included in the background section to provide a more multifaceted description of who Alvin is outside of the identity given to him by the school.

### **Background**

At the time of his interview, Alvin, an African American male, was 15 years old and preparing to transition to home school for ninth grade. His mom explained that she is disappointed in the amount of academic progress Alvin has made in the self-contained classroom. In this school district, all students in one school who are removed from the general



education classroom, due to academic needs, are served in the same classroom regardless of the severity of their cognitive deficit. Alvin's mom felt that if he had been challenged more, taught more than a basic functional skills curriculum, then he would have experienced more growth. Math has always been a relative strength for Alvin. Before schools closed due to COVID-19, he was attending a general education math class on a trial basis. Alvin's mom discusses her opinion of his services in the following interview excerpt:

**Interviewer:** What have your impressions been of the help that he gets?

**Alvin's Mom:** As far as like the speech services, I really think it really helped him to where he has come. So, basically, in his math skills, I could see him improving in that. I could see his reading...

**Interviewer:** His reading has grown? How about his comprehension? I remember he used to always be a pretty good reader, but the comprehension was a struggle.

**Alvin's Mom:** It's still a struggle, but he has...

**Interviewer:** He's grown in that as well?

**Alvin's Mom:** He's improved.

**Interviewer:** That's great. Has he had any opportunities to do anything, like basketball or a band, or anything like that?

**Alvin's Mom:** No. I thought about it, but [chuckle] we're just so tight on him. We just haven't let him.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Alvin's Mom:** The only time he'll really play basketball like is at my mother-in-law's house, and stuff, like when we do it, it'll be...

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Alvin's Mom:** Not like school. I thought about letting him be in a band though.

**Interviewer:** Right. Okay, I understand. Sometimes if you're not certain that they can tell you if they have a problem, it's hard to trust to let them be in a new situation.

**Alvin's Mom:** That's why I'm trying to help him, right now, to help him see that he's going to have to like express himself more in class and stuff. But he's so quiet.

**Interviewer:** Right. So, I know you said that you were thinking about doing the homeschooling and that's because of the, the class has such a diverse group in it. If it was... I guess if the class was more targeted for kids that were more like Alvin, would you feel more comfortable with him being there?

**Alvin's Mom:** Yes.

[pause]

**Alvin's Mom:** It was him and another student. I think it was Jake. They call him Jake.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yes. Yes.

**Alvin's Mom:** And I feel like they were doing better than the rest.

**Interviewer:** Yes, yes. I agree. I know the last year when we had so many of them, the last year I was here, we did try to divide them into two classes for that reason, but unfortunately, the other teacher wasn't really able to manage the class well, so I ended up having to put them back together. So, it was unfortunate for them.

**Alvin's Mom:** I felt like he should've been done way more from the time you left, up 'til now.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Alvin's Mom:** I felt like he would be on his fifth-grade level, but a lot of the stuff they say he's still on third, third grade level.

**Interviewer:** Really? Okay.

**Alvin's Mom:** I felt like if they would've put him on... separated them...

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. They could have pushed him a little bit more. Okay.

[pause]

**Alvin's Mom:** I felt like when you and Ms. H... that really helped.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Alvin's Mom:** I can see the difference in my child. (personal communication, June 5, 2020)

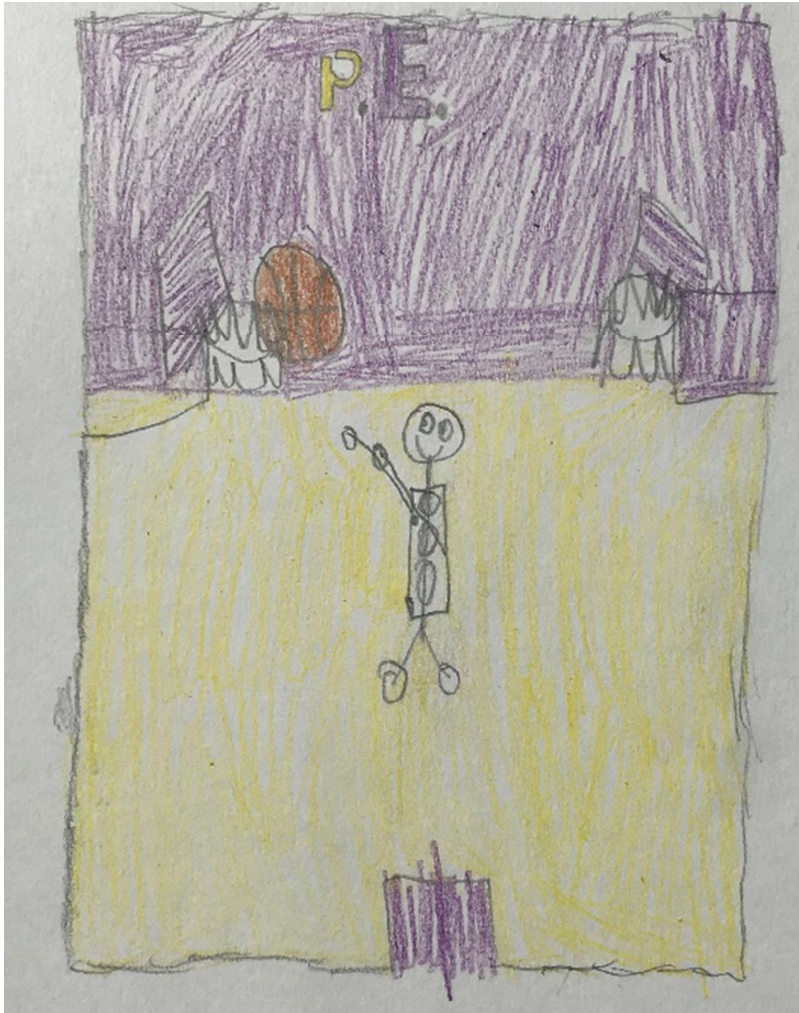
Like Kara, Alvin has been receiving special education services since he was in Head Start. His teacher became worried about his atypical development and called his mother for a conference. Alvin was a student in my classroom from 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. At that time, he received small group instruction in the self-contained classroom, speech services, and adaptive physical education. At the time of his interview, Alvin's services included speech and small group instruction in the self-contained classroom as a student with autism and a mild intellectual dis/ability. He has no medical diagnoses or health concerns.

Alvin has always been an avid sketcher of events in his life. This is one of the reasons I felt that he would be a good participant for this study. During an IEP meeting, his mother revealed to me that after they went somewhere, Alvin would draw it. With this information, we began to use his drawings as a precursor to classroom comprehension activities. This activity gave him a way to organize his thoughts visually on paper to support him while expressing his ideas and understandings to his teachers either verbally or in writing.

### **Counternarrative**

### **Figure 3**

*Alvin's Positive Educational Experience*



When asked to draw a positive educational experience, Alvin responded, “I like the gym.” His explanation of his drawing follows:

**Interviewer:** Alright. I love how detailed your drawing is. It's very nice. Okay, so your picture is in the gym. Is that you playing basketball?

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** What is good or fun about what's happening in your picture?

**Alvin:** It's fun playing in the gym.

**Interviewer:** It's fun playing in the gym. When you go to the gym, are you usually by yourself or you have your other classmates?

**Alvin:** All of us.

**Interviewer:** Are they the people who are in your class all day, or are there other people there, too?

**Alvin:** All day.

**Interviewer:** All day people? Okay.

**Interviewer:** How often do you get to go to the gym?

**Alvin:** Good.

**Interviewer:** You like going? (Alvin nods.) Do you get to go once a week, or do you get to go every day?

**Alvin:** Every day. [Alvin's mom later clarified that he goes every day during the nine weeks that P.E. is his specials class.]

**Interviewer:** Every day? Okay. So, I see that you're by yourself. Do you ever play basketball with your friends when you're in the gym?

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Who do you like to play with?

**Alvin:** I haven't played with... I just play it by myself.

**Interviewer:** You play it by yourself? Okay.

**Alvin's Mom:** When you're in school, is that what you mean? (Alvin nods.) Okay. While he was in school or now?

**Interviewer:** When he's in school.

**Alvin's Mom:** When you in school, you play by yourself?

(Alvin nods.)

**Interviewer:** Okay. Okay (personal communication, June 5, 2020)

**Figure 4**

*Alvin's Negative Educational Experience*



Alvin discusses his drawing:

**Interviewer:** Okay. So, Alvin, this one, I see you wrote classroom, so this picture is in the classroom?

**Alvin:** The thing I don't like in this... That I was doing work... I didn't like it.

**Interviewer:** You didn't like the work. What kind of work was it?

**Alvin:** It was about reading.

**Interviewer:** It was about reading.

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** What was it that you didn't like about the reading?

**Alvin:** The sentences on it.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Were you writing the sentences or reading the sentences?

**Alvin:** Writing.

**Interviewer:** Writing. Okay. When you write your sentences, do you get to use pictures?

Do you have... Or do you just use words?

**Alvin:** I just use words.

**Interviewer:** Use words. Does the teacher give you any words to help you get going or do you think of all your words by yourself?

**Alvin:** Help me with them.

**Interviewer:** She does? That's great. When you do writing, do you do any drawing with it, do you draw before you write?

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** You do. And then do you write about your picture that you draw?

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Does it make it easier for you when you draw first to write your sentences?

(Alvin nods.)

**Interviewer:** So, you're the only person that you drew in the picture. Who would be with you when you were in your class doing writing? (Alvin shrugs) Not sure? Okay. What could we change in this picture to make it something good instead of something bad?

**Alvin:** That... that I'd... I'd like to draw.

**Interviewer:** Okay, more drawing.

**Alvin:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** I remember that you liked to draw. Are there any things that you can think about, about school that you really like? What are some of your favorite things?

**Alvin:** My favorite things?

**Interviewer:** Uh-huh. I know you like the gym and playing basketball. Any other places that you like?

**Alvin:** Art.

**Interviewer:** You like art. How about people? Who are your favorite people to be with?

**Alvin:** All of them.

**Interviewer:** All of them. All of the people in the school or all the people in your class?

**Alvin:** All of the people in my class.

**Interviewer:** In your class. What places in the school do you not like to go to?

**Alvin:** Reading.

**Interviewer:** Reading. Do you do reading in your same classroom or do you go to a different classroom for that? (Alvin shrugs.) Okay. What people do you not like to be around at school? (Alvin shrugs.) Okay. I'm going to, like I said, I'm going to let you keep your drawings. You did a nice job, and I really appreciate the details and how careful you were when you drew for me. (personal communication, June 5, 2020)

### **Preliminary Reflections**

Clear differences between the positive and negative experience were also present in Alvin's drawings. His presentation of the classroom as a small space with a single desk and no



other occupants evokes within me the feeling of a prison cell opposed to a place of learning. When asked about other positive educational environments school, Alvin stated that he enjoys the art room. Alvin's drawing of his positive experience is twice as big as the drawing of his negative experience. In his drawings, Alvin uses body position to communicate his emotion. In Alvin's positive experience, he is smiling, and his body is turned to face to the viewer as he plays basketball. However, in his negative experience, he is frowning, and his body is hunched over his desk as he completes a writing assignment. When asked how the negative experience could be improved, Alvin suggested adding more drawing. Alvin's positive places in the school are classes that foster movement, creativity, and expression. These are qualities that are likely missing from his self-contained classroom.

## **Derek**

### **Interview Setting**

I met with Derek at his mother's apartment inside a housing complex in the rural town where the school is located. I was uncertain of the directions to his home that were supplied by the navigation app on my phone. I was prompted to turn off one of the main streets onto a small road that appeared to come to a dead end at some trees. Just before reaching the trees, the road made a nearly 90 degree turn into the hidden complex that resembled the short brick buildings of a government housing complex.

I parked at the end of the walkway to the apartment. Derek was waiting outside the door and ran to my car to greet me with hug. I immediately noticed that despite his increase in height, he still appeared much like the young boy who had been in my classroom, nearly bone thin (often a side effect of ADHD medication) and full of happy eager energy.

He led me into the living room of the apartment where we held the interview. His mother, sister, and brother were in and out of the room throughout the interview. His mother was busy doing laundry and monitoring Derek's brother as he cleaned the bathroom. His little sister watched television in her room, but also came in to see what Derek was doing and ask if she could draw with us. In passing, Derek's mother shared with me one of his current achievements, that I will include in the background section to provide a better picture of who Derek is outside of the identity created for him by the school. His mother completed her part of the interview questions once Derek had completed his drawings.

### **Background**

At the time of his interview, Derek was 11 years old and preparing for 7<sup>th</sup> grade at the local middle school. He has been receiving special education services since he was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Derek first received specialized support following his birth. Derek was born prematurely, so he received necessary medical interventions at birth and supervision as he grew older. Derek also received services from the Babies Can't Wait program. This program provides learning and development supports for children from birth to age three (*Babies Can't Wait*, 2020). Currently, Derek is healthy. His only medical diagnosis is for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Derek was a student in my classroom during his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade year. At that time, he received small group instruction in the self-contained classroom, speech services, and adaptive physical education. In the following excerpt from the interview transcript, Derek's mom discusses the services he has received since then:

**Interviewer:** Is he still getting all of his classes in the self-contained classroom, separate from everyone else?

**Derek's Mom:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** Did he have any services that were trial or temporary basis? Like did they say, we're going to try him in the general ed classroom and see how he does, or we'll try him doing something different or has he just been in that same environment?

**Derek's Mom:** Uh, he's been in that same environment. Because he was behind anyways, with his learning ability.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Derek's Mom:** I mean they tried to put him in general ed, but I'm like he can't do that general ed.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Derek's Mom:** Well, well... the regular classes. He couldn't, they tried to put him in, but I'm like he isn't up fast enough to be in the regular class. I think he still need more help.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Derek's Mom:** But he's come a long way. I know that.

**Interviewer:** What did they say when they graduated him from speech?

**Derek's Mom:** Well, we had a conference call, and they were saying he passed. Basically, they were just saying that he had completed his goals and stuff for speech. So, uh, he's no longer eligible for speech. They don't require him to have it anymore.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any kinds of impressions or opinions of the kind of the things or the services he has or has not received that you kind of want to contribute?

**Derek's Mom:** To be honest, I'm thankful for the services. Because without those services, I don't know where he would be or where I would be. You know, because it's

kind of hard for me to just try and help him. You know it's just challenging for me to try and help him. When I don't understand how to break it down to him. You know, the way so he could learn, versus somebody who's experienced, and you know, knows how to help, um... help him then. That's why, I'm really thankful for the services that he's been getting. But, he's come a long way.

**Interviewer:** Yes, I just saw the way he was writing on the paper. I didn't ask him to write anything, but he was writing, and he was writing very clearly.

**Derek's Mom:** They say that he's a good reader. He loves to read. Um, he can spell real good. There's a lot of things he's accomplished as far as school. I wouldn't think that he would come this far as fast as he did. It was a lot going on when he was a child.

**Interviewer:** I think he's done really well. He's definitely growing up.

**Derek's Mom:** He's getting the attitude now, the teenager attitude.

**Interviewer:** (laughing) Yeah, that's coming.

**Derek's Mom:** (laughing) (personal communication, June 3, 2020)

During our interview, Derek brought up several of his interests. He told me about his 13-year-old dog. Derek often talked about Sonic the Hedgehog and the video game Roblox. After his part of the interview, while we waited for his mother to come back into the living room to complete her part of the interview. He drew and colored a picture of Sonic. Then he borrowed his brother's phone to show me his favorite game on Roblox. While drawing, Derek shared with me which of his friends were moving to the high school and informed me that a student who had left the year he was in my classroom had recently returned and was in his class once again. He also told me that he loves to eat ice cream, and that swirl is his favorite. In addition, Derek's

mother proudly informed me that he had been included on the basketball team the previous year as the water boy.

### Counternarrative

#### Figure 5

#### *Derek's Positive Educational Experience*



Derek<sup>3</sup> discusses his drawing in the following excerpt from the interview transcript:

**Interviewer:** So, while you're coloring tell me a little bit about your picture. Who's in it?

**Derek:** Uh...my friends.

**Interviewer:** Who are they?

**Derek:** Ms. H, and me, and Kara

**Interviewer:** And Kara. Okay, who's Ms. H?

**Derek:** You know. The lady that goes to the middle school.

**Interviewer:** Is she your teacher there?

**Derek:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** And she stays with you all day or just part of the day?

**Derek:** Part of the day.

**Interviewer:** Part of the day. Okay.

**Interviewer:** So, what are you and Kara and Ms. H doing in your picture?

**Derek:** Um... Working.

**Interviewer:** What are you working on?

**Derek:** Like... math.

**Interviewer:** Math

**Derek:** But sometimes I get a little nervous with math.

**Interviewer:** Oh, really? Some math can be tricky, especially middle school math.....

**Interviewer:** So where is this picture that you're drawing? Where is it taking place?

**Derek:** Like in school.

**Interviewer:** Is it in the middle school? (Derek nods.) Okay. Is it in your classroom or a different room?

**Derek:** Uh... Well, we live across the hallway.

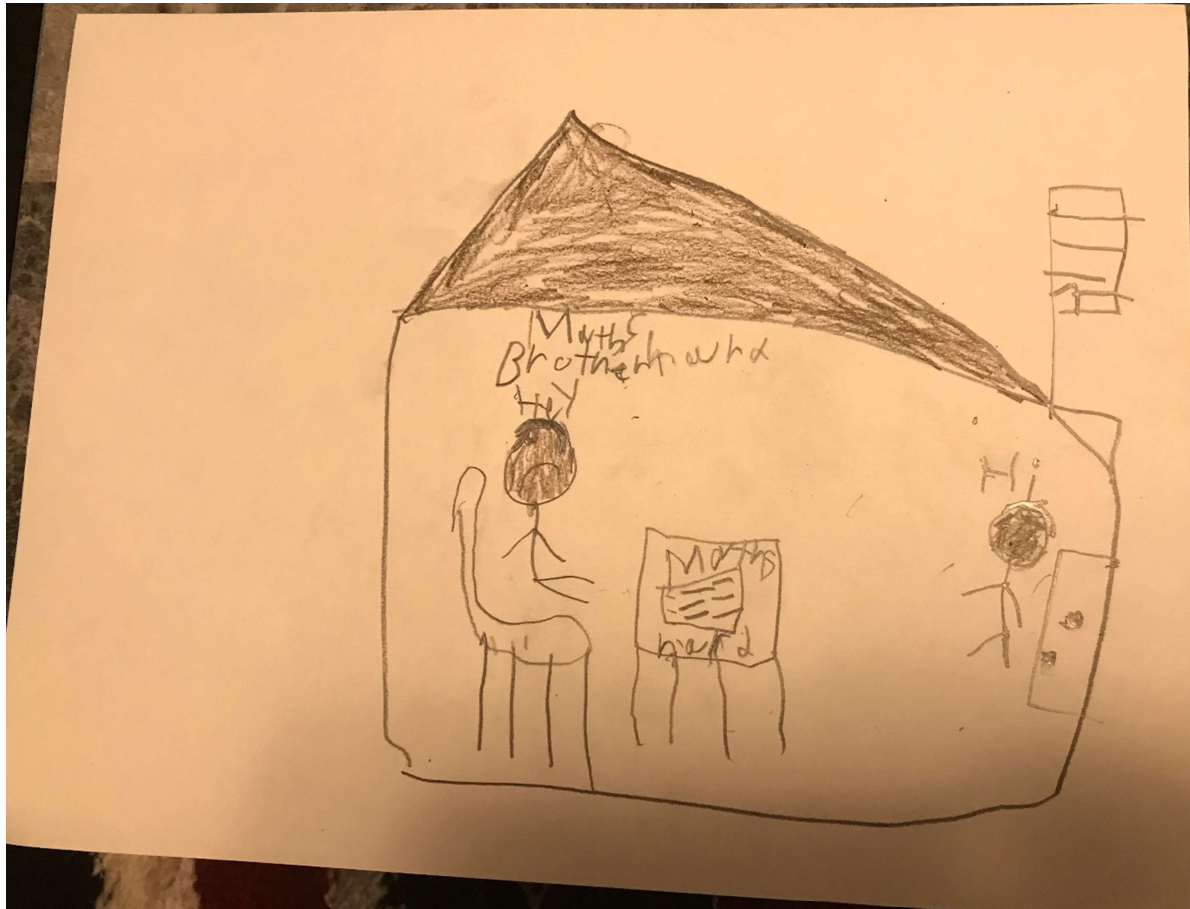
**Interviewer:** It's across the hallway from your classroom? (Derek nods.) ....

**Interviewer:** So what makes this a good learning experience for you?

**Derek:** Well, when I do good in school, when I do all my subjects in school. (personal communication, June 3, 2020)

**Figure 6**

*Derek's Negative Educational Experience*



I next asked him to draw a negative educational experience, Derek responded, “well, math.... because I know it’s really hard for me.” Derek discusses his drawing in the following excerpt from the interview transcript:

**Derek:** Done.

**Interviewer:** That’s good! Tell me who’s in your picture.

**Derek:** Well, my brother and...

**Interviewer:** You and your brother.

**Derek:** I think that’s me and my brother.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Derek:** When he was a baby.

**Interviewer:** So where are you working there?

**Derek:** Math

**Interviewer:** You're doing your math. Are you at school? Where are you?

**Derek:** At school.

**Interviewer:** At school doing math. Okay. Are you in the classroom?

(Derek nods.)

**Interviewer:** Does your brother go to the same school you do?

**Derek:** Uh, uh. He goes to the elementary school.

**Interviewer:** That's what I was thinking. Okay..... So you told me you were doing math in this picture, the good picture. And then you're doing math in this picture too. What makes the math good in this picture?....

**Derek:** Like when I say hi to my brother, he walks in, and then he says hi, and then I say hey brother and then I say...

[pauses]

**Derek:** And this says hard.

**Interviewer:** I see that. It says hard math. What makes the math easy math?

**Derek:** Well, I go to school... Well, Kara isn't back and (indistinguishable). I'm in the second seat. Kara in the third seat. And me and Kara are doing work.

**Interviewer:** Are you working together?

**Derek:** Um-hmm.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** Are you working with anybody in this picture?

**Derek:** Yeah.



**Interviewer:** Who are you working with there?

**Derek:** My brother. Trying to help me

**Interviewer:** Your brother. Okay. (personal communication, June 3, 2020)

### **Preliminary Reflections**

Derek's drawings of a positive and negative educational experience represent two very different experiences of the same classroom environment. Derek's positive experience drawing covers almost the entire page. In the classroom section of the drawing, he includes three desks with chairs, himself, Kara, and their teacher. In his drawing of his negative experience, he only covers 2/3 of the paper, and he only draws one desk and chair, himself, and his brother, who does not attend the same school. The loss of his teacher and classmate and the addition of a brother who can only be present in spirit infuses a feeling of loneliness into the drawing for me. In Derek's positive experience he appears to be standing on his chair eagerly leaning toward the teacher. In his negative experience, Derek is sitting in the chair with a large frown on his face.

When asked about other places and people in the school he likes/does not like he provides the following response:

**Interviewer:** Where are your favorite places to go in the school?

**Derek:** You talking about in school?

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Derek:** Like, you know, where we eat.

**Interviewer:** Okay, you like to go to the lunchroom, okay.

**Derek:** And, I'm hungry. I'm looking at that cereal back there.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah? So why do you like to go to the lunchroom.

**Derek:** Because, we can eat.

**Interviewer:** Is there anywhere else you like to go?

**Derek:** Like... gym.

**Interviewer:** What do you like to do in the gym?

**Derek:** Play basketball.

**Interviewer:** Who do you like to be around at school? Who do you like to hang out with?

**Derek:** Well, Jessica.

**Interviewer:** Okay, who is that? Is she in your class?

**Derek:** She's in....

**Interviewer:** When do you get to see her?

**Derek:** Well, when we get out the school, she goes on the bus. But she usually always sick.

**Interviewer:** Okay. What are some of the things that you don't like to do at school?

**Derek:** Like, math. And I want to draw Shadow. [Derek was provided additional paper to draw as he talked.]

**Interviewer:** Are there any places that you don't like to go at school?

**Derek:** Like, reading.

**Interviewer:** You don't like to go to reading? Who's your reading teacher?

**Derek:** Like, Mrs. P, and I don't know who my reading teacher is at the middle school.

**Interviewer:** That's okay. So, what is it about reading that you don't like?

**Derek:** Well, I usually don't read like hard books.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm. Are there any people that you don't like to be around at school?

**Derek:** Tasha.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah? Why is that?

**Derek:** Because, well, she t-e-l-l, tell, you know?

**Interviewer:** What does she tell?

**Derek:** Like when we do stuff. She do it. Oh, you know Shadow's in the movie?

(Derek tells the interviewer about the characters who he thinks are in the new Sonic movie.) (personal communication, June 3, 2020)

Derek's positive and negative educational experiences both included him completing a math assignment in the classroom. When asked why it was a positive experience, he remarked that it is good when he does well in class and completes all his assignments. I would say that this positive experience is not just about the math activity, but more about the feeling of success he has when he does a good job on his assignments and completes all his required work. When asked about his negative experience, he explains that math is hard for him. Derek also stated that he does not like reading. In the drawing, he conjures his brother's presence for support to complete his assignment. When discussing the difference between the positive and negative experience in relation to the math assignment, he states that in the positive experience he is doing work with Kara.

### **Reflections on Methodology**

For this study, I collected the counternarratives of my participants, through drawing and interview, to answer the question, "How do students with a mild intellectual dis/ability experience education in a self-contained setting?" and challenge the perspective of the master-narrative that dis/ability denotes deficit and that students with cognitive dis/abilities benefit from being educated in the self-contained classroom. Counternarrative inquiry empowers the disenfranchised to confront the master-narrative by sharing the truth of their experience. This study prioritizes their experiential knowledge providing a medium through which the participants

can share their thoughts and feelings about the education they receive in the self-contained classroom.

My participants' counternarratives reveal how similar the participants are to other students their age. They enjoy the creative and active aspects of learning, and they desire to interact with their peers. However, they may differ from their non-dis/abled age-level peers in that each participants' experience in their academic instruction is a negative one. This would indicate that an education within a self-contained classroom is not effective, due to the negative feelings it fosters within the students toward their learning. This place that we have been told shelters, nurtures, and enriches the lives of students with dis/abilities, the place where these students are forced to receive all instruction, while their age-level peers are changing classes, is the place in which my participants were the least happy.

When creating their counternarratives, my participants began in a medium that is comfortable to them. As their former teacher, I knew that all of my participants had received services for speech differences, and that Kara and Alvin communicated more powerfully through gestures and expressions, then through spoken words. I also knew that each participant was comfortable drawing. In the interview, both Derek and Alvin confirmed this preference by stating that they enjoy art. Therefore, I asked my participants to represent their experiences first by drawing, then to complete a semi-structured interview about the drawing. Using the drawing as the primary means to communicate their experience, also supported the participants while answering questions. When attempting to explain why math was sometimes a positive experience and sometimes a negative experience, Derek returned to his drawings and pointed out to me that he had labeled the math "hard" in the negative drawing and noted that he had Kara in the positive drawing.

By choosing the method of communication that was preferred by my participants, I not only gave them the greatest opportunity to express themselves, but I also showed respect for their unique abilities. I prioritized the participant, and his/her story, over the traditional modes of communication, written and verbal. In the production of that story, the participants demonstrated complex consideration of their experiences which defy the ableist notion of these students' limitations, revealing instead their true intellect.

I also endeavored to respect my participants by ensuring their comfort and confidentiality. To ensure that they would feel comfortable telling me the truth of their experiences, I first had to provide them with a secure setting in which to complete their counternarratives. Kara and Derek chose to work at their homes, while Alvin chose to work at the local park. The participants had family close to them during the drawing and interview. Both Kara and Alvin periodically glanced up at their mothers for encouragement during the processes. Though it had been four years since the participants had last seen me, they seemed at ease in my presence. To my delight, Derek ran out to hug me as soon as I stepped out of my car.

In addition to ensuring their comfort in the place and manner of their participation in the study, it was also necessary for me to ensure their confidentiality. The participants would not have been able to speak freely if they had to worry that their teachers, or other members in their very small community of which the school system was a major employer, would hear their words of criticism and become hurt or angry. Without the freedom to speak openly of their experiences, the question of the quality of those experiences could not be answered, and their voices would once again be silenced through the imbalance of power that causes their educational subjugation. Therefore, I protected the identity of the participants by using pseudonyms and by refraining from naming their schools or town.

## Reflections on Theoretical Framework

### Critical Disability Studies

At the time of this study, Derek and Kara were receiving all their academic instruction in the self-contained classroom, and Alvin received all academic instruction, except math, in the self-contained classroom. At the middle (Derek) and high (Kara and Alvin) schools, they attend specials, such as art and P.E., and eat breakfast and lunch in the main cafeteria. However, in both settings, they are restricted to going with their classmates from the self-contained classroom. The other students eat breakfast and lunch independently and rotate through six periods of classes at the middle school and eight periods of classes at the high school. As they rotate through classes, they interact with different people, benefit from different teaching practices (receiving instruction from a content specialist versus specialist in “special” education), and develop the confidence to navigate a busy, and sometimes confusing world. While my participants are missing out on these vital learning experiences because of their imprisonment within the self-contained classroom.

### *DisCrit*

When I reached out to the parents of my former students to invite them to participate in this study, COVID-19 was ravaging the world. Many individuals with dis/abilities may be more susceptible to illness. The fear of possible infection prevented some of my former students from participating in the study. Of my three participants, two were African American. I did expect that I would have more African American participants, because I had more African American students. However, I also expected group of participants to be larger and more representative of the diversity of our classroom. Therefore, the size of my group of participants limits my ability to make any findings about the impact of race for my participants’ counternarratives.

## Critical Geography

Place is an important issue emerging from the participant's counternarratives. The expectation of a public education is that all students will be welcomed. However, the experiences shared by my participants indicated that their education of exclusion is one of loneliness and despair. All of them drew the classroom as their negative experience. Kara and Alvin of the participants drew the gym as their positive experience, and Derek stated that it is one of his favorite places to go in the school. The gym is not only a place of movement and socialization, but also one of the few places that students outside their classroom also attend, though not at the same time as them. They also receive instruction from the content specialists who teach all the other students, the Coaches, instead of their special education teachers. In this space, they could imagine a different education, one of autonomy, inclusion, and belonging.

Another thing I noticed in my participants' drawings of their negative experiences was a sense of isolation. In Kara's positive experience, she was with her coaches in the gym, but in her negative drawing she was alone in the classroom. In Derek's positive drawing he was with a friend and one of his teachers, but in his negative drawing he was alone and felt the need to add his brother to the drawing for comfort. This is also seen in how working with Kara makes his math assignment a positive experience, while working alone makes it a negative experience. In Alvin's positive experience, his body is turned toward the viewer; however, in his negative experience, he is turned away from the viewer and confined within the walls of his classroom.

Their presentation of the classroom illustrates that the limitations of the learning environment are inherent to a "special" education, not the students. Given the limitations, why are they not included in their schools' learning communities? Derek was given a token place on the basketball as water boy, and both him and his mother were proud of this small

accomplishment. Alvin's mom does not feel comfortable allowing him to try out for basketball, because she questions his safety. Both parents and students accepted less than what an equitable education promises, because they have internalized the ableist perspective of difference as deficit. When individuals with dis/abilities are not included, then the belief that they cannot or should not be included is reinforced. This belief then supports the exclusion of individuals with dis/abilities. Only by breaking the cycle, by making inclusion a way of life, can the truth be revealed.

### **Curriculum Studies**

My participants' counternarratives exposed the despair and failure of the self-contained classroom as a place of learning and growth. Each participant's negative educational experience was of classwork. Derek and Kara both drew a math activity, while Alvin drew a reading activity (sentence writing). Kara stated that she does not like any subjects, and Derek stated that he does not like reading, either. Common complaints about their classwork included both the difficulty and the quantity of the work. When asked how to improve the experience, Kara and Derek suggested working with a partner. When asked the same question, Alvin suggested including more drawing.

In my study, two of the three participants expressed a need for companionship and collaboration with peers which is lacking in their environment of isolation. When prompted, Derek discussed the difference between the positive and negative educational experiences he drew, both of which include him completing a math assignment. He explained that in the positive experience he is working with Kara. Working alone in the negative experience, Derek inserts his brother into the drawing, who does not attend his school, for comfort. When asked how to



improve their negative experiences, both Kara and Derek recommended allowing collaboration when completing assignments.

The participants' dislike for their academic classes is concerning. If the things they enjoy most about school are those activities available to them outside of school, such as movement (sports), collaboration (group/partner work), and creativity (art), then their motivation to attend school is limited to the encouragement they receive from their parents and an intrinsic drive to better their lives. When they are trained to expect so little from their lives and to believe that they are capable of achieving little through their own efforts, how confident can they or their parents be that the rewards they could reap by completing school would outweigh the daily damages inflicted by their education of exclusion?

In this chapter, I have provided the counternarratives of three very different students. The counternarratives are situated with a description of the interview settings and of the participants' backgrounds. Each counternarrative is presented visually through the participant's drawings and explained by the participant in a semi-structured interview. In the following chapter, I will explore the findings emerged from the analysis of this data.

## CHAPTER 5

## REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In my inquiry, I want to explore opportunities for greater equity for students with dis/abilities within the schools by asking: How do students with a mild intellectual dis/ability experience education in the self-contained setting? I utilized counternarrative inquiry and arts-based research to answer this question. I collected and analyzed drawings of the positive and negative educational experiences of three students considered significantly dis/abled by their school system, labeled as having a mild intellectual dis/ability, and placed in the self-contained special education classroom of their local public school. The master-narrative states that the self-contained classroom is the best educational environment for students with intellectual dis/abilities to learn. Therefore, it should be the most inviting to them and the most successful at educating them. However, Kara's, Alvin's, and Derek's counternarratives expressed dissatisfaction with both the difficulty and the quantity of their classwork and in the instructional methods used (independent versus collaborative learning). Alvin's mother was so disappointed in her son's lack of academic growth that she now homeschools him. Their stories, in word and drawing, evoked an image of being educated within a colorless prison of limitation and loneliness.

When theorizing their counternarratives, I build upon the works of critical disability studies (Erevelles 2000, 2002, 2005, 2015; also Annamma 2018; Tremain 2005) to explore the effects of biopower and intersectionality on students with dis/abilities. When considering the use of space and place in the educational situation imposed upon these students, I build on the work of critical geography (Harvey, 2000; Helfenbein, Jr. 2004; Soja 1989, 2010). I also build upon the work of curriculum studies (Maudlin 2008; Snowber 2016; Springgay & Freedman 2008;

Swanson 2008) when examining the effects of their current deficit-focused curriculum on the development of students with dis/abilities. Through an analysis of the educational experiences of these students with dis/abilities, I seek to instigate a discussion on the lack of equity in their education and how this injustice can be eliminated.

My methodology builds on the work of scholars in counternarrative inquiry (Bell 1999; Delgado 1989; He & Ayers 2009; He & Ross 2015; He, Ross, & Seay 2015; Solórzano & Yosso 2002). With counternarrative inquiry, I highlight the educational situations of students with dis/abilities through their stories. My work also builds upon art-based research (Barone & Eisner 2006; Coles 1992; also Bae-Dimitriadis 2020) through the creation of drawings by my participants to provide a rich illustration of their experiences. Building on the work of those scholars conducting research with children with dis/abilities (Aslamazova, Yurina Kochendova & Krasnova 2016; Søndergaard & Reventlow 2019; Jenkin, Wilson, Murfitt, Clarke, Campain, & Stockman, 2015; Maxwell 2006), my inclusion of this often dismissed population values and respects them as contributors of knowledge about issues concerning their education.

Six findings have emerged from my dissertation research: **(1)** When conducting research with students with dis/abilities, researchers must create a safe and welcoming space in which their confidentiality is protected, and their stories are told through a comfortable medium. **(2)** Arts-based research transgresses traditional dissertation inquiries to tell the silenced narrative of students with dis/abilities and liberate their voice from the constraints of ableism. **(3)** Counternarratives empower children with dis/abilities to share valuable insights into their educational experience and speak against the master-narrative of ableism and privilege that often disenfranchises and dehumanizes them as deficient and inferior and failures. **(4)** Exclusion in education damages the sense of worth and belonging of students with dis/abilities, furthers their

marginalization, and sabotages their potential in school and life. **(5)** There is a demand to engender an embodied curriculum within a beloved community and infused with a pedagogy of heart that disrupts the ableism inherent in dominant educational structures, practices, and policies for students with intellectual dis/abilities which prevent them from reaching graduation and thriving in life. **(6)** Instead of imprisoning the bodies and minds of students with dis/abilities, educators must work with other educational workers such as teachers, administrators, educational staff, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy of caring and justice, cultivate a culturally inspiring school environment, and create hopes, dreams, and equal opportunities for students with dis/abilities and all others to reach their highest potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

When conducting research with students with dis/abilities, researchers must create a safe and welcoming space in which their confidentiality is protected, and their stories are told through a comfortable medium (**Finding 1**). In “Inclusive Practice for Research with Children with Disability: A Guide,” Jenkin et al (2015) discuss the following points ensure ethical treatment of children with dis/abilities who are participating in research: informed consent and assent, balancing privacy and support, confidentiality, and safety, protection, and safeguards. Prior to participation, the study design and purpose were fully explained to Kara, Alvin, and Derek and their parents; agreement for participation was obtained from both. A safe and welcoming space is one in which students with dis/abilities feel free to express themselves without fear of criticism or retaliation. In my study, the participants chose the interview space and had family members close at hand to impart encouraging glances and words as needed. Additionally, as their former teacher, they were familiar with me. Guaranteeing confidentiality allows students with dis/abilities to share a story they may be embarrassed or afraid to tell. It encourages a freedom of

expression the student may have never before been empowered to demonstrate. To protect Kara's, Alvin's, and Derek's confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms in place of their real names, and I have not included the names of their schools or the town in which they live. To respect their ways of knowing and communicating, the use of a comfortable medium is essential when conducting research with students with dis/abilities. For my Kara, Alvin, and Derek, this comfortable medium was drawing, because it does not depend heavily on written or verbal expression. Yet it allows them to illustrate complicated emotion and experience to present their story.

Arts-based research transgresses traditional dissertation inquiries to tell the silenced narrative of students with dis/abilities and liberate their voice from the constraints of ableism (**Finding 2**). Traditional dissertation inquiries are inherently ableist. They privilege certain modes of expression, such as writing and speaking. To many students with dis/abilities these methods of communication are problematic. Kara, Alvin, and Derek have all received speech services. These services addressed multiple areas of verbal communication, including articulation, organizing thoughts into verbal utterances of increasing length (from one word, to phrase, to sentence), and adding details and descriptions to responses. Kara, Alvin, and Derek struggled similarly with the organization of ideas into complex sentences when using written expression.

The ability to communicate clearly through these modes of expression has historically been used as a measure of intelligence. However, through the use of new technologies such as facilitated communication, letter boards, and keyboards, nonverbal individuals with dis/abilities have begun to reveal hidden voices full of unexpected knowledge and evidence of complex understandings. Therefore, we can no longer accept the ableist assumption of the correlation

between written/verbal communication and intelligence. Like technology, arts-based research provides several creative mediums through which to explore issues related to individuals with dis/abilities and emphasize their strengths versus weaknesses. It is especially relevant to this study, because “it moves to broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practice by calling attention to seemingly commonsensical, taken-for-granted notions” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96) of the master-narrative. Through drawing Kara, Alvin, and Derek represented the truth of their educational experiences. They highlighted important people, places, and activities at their schools. Then they used their drawings to provide a succinct verbal critique of the good and the bad of their experiences.

Counternarratives empower children with dis/abilities to share valuable insights into their educational experience and speak against the master-narrative of ableism and privilege that often disenfranchises and dehumanizes them as deficient and inferior and failures (**Finding 3**). “Historically and culturally derived bodies of knowledge speak truth to the power of oppression and counter dominant narratives” (He et al., 2015, p. 76). These stories poignantly contest the claims of the master-narrative exposing systematic inequities in the education of students labeled as dis/abled. The construction of a counternarrative is an accessible method for children with dis/abilities to exercise agency over their education. While educational decisions are often made with little to no input from those who receive it, this is especially true for students with dis/abilities who have limited access to enrichment classes, extra-curricular activities, and instructional tracks (college-prep versus vocational classes in high school). However, these students can speak out about the injustice inherent to their “special” education through the creation of counternarratives. In “An Anticolonial Land-Based Approach to Urban Place: Mobile

Cartographic Stories by Refugee Youth,” Bae-Dimitriadis (2020) explains the importance of speaking back against the master-narrative.

By (re)writing new spatial stories, individuals can resist the notion that who they are is defined by where they are. Rather than engaging in this subjugated practice, it is necessary to question and reveal missing stories in the production of a space as well as the hegemonic colonial system’s concealment of sites of resistance, subversion, pain, struggle, love, and reimagination. (p. 133)

Children with dis/abilities, and their stories, are often missing from the educational landscape. When questions about education are raised, they rarely include the education of students in self-contained classrooms, unless they are questions about “special education.” Students with noticeable learning differences are typically housed in self-contained classes and are frequently excluded in participating in social and extracurricular activities with other students. Emerging from the ableist perspective of deficit, books, television, and films often present the lives of children with dis/abilities as tragic. The structure of schooling is disabling to students with learning differences which appears to reinforce the master-narrative of inferiority. This view of children with dis/abilities as inferior and deficient has contributed to the exclusion of their personal narratives from popular and scholarly literature. Stories are told about them, but not by them.

Kara, Alvin, and Derek had never before been asked to consider the education they are receiving. They had never been asked to evaluate what parts of their education were experienced as positive, affirming, and encouraging, and what parts of their education were experienced as negative, demeaning, and discouraging to their learning. Never before had they had the opportunity to argue what is not working and to advocate for ways to improve their education.

Counternarratives provide individuals outside of the majority population the ability to expose the truth of their experiences. To shine a light on our misconceptions and say that the things that we have been taught to accept as common sense (such as the medical model of dis/ability) should actually be questioned and viewed through a different lens. In the case of educating students with dis/abilities, we must view that education through the eyes of children with dis/abilities, instead of through our position of power and privilege. Counternarrative is the vehicle through which children with dis/abilities can accomplish that change in perspective in others.

Exclusion in schools damages the sense of worth and belonging of students with dis/abilities, furthers their marginalization, and sabotages their potential in school and life **(Finding 4)**. Kara, Alvin, and Derek experience schooling as exclusion. The schooling of individuals attempts to build within them habits they will carry throughout life. They are taught punctuality and persistence in completing tasks that are sometimes tedious and other times challenging, skills often sought by employers. Schools also teach rule-following and deference to authority figures, habits which encourage individuals to become law-abiding citizens who can conform to the social order. The habits and skills developed within students with dis/abilities by their education of exclusion also impact not only their current educational experiences but also their future opportunities. Students with dis/abilities begin to view themselves not just as different than their peers, but as deficient because of that difference. They internalize their academic and social failures as indicative of their lack of worth and ability, not as the result of an unwelcoming environment and inequitable education. Their experiences of inadequacy and rejection often deter students with dis/abilities from pursuing educational, social, and career opportunities, thus furthering their marginalization.



There is a demand to engender an embodied curriculum within a beloved community (1996) and infused with a pedagogy of heart (Freire, 1997) that disrupts the ableism inherent in dominant educational structures, practices, and policies for students with intellectual dis/abilities which prevent them from reaching graduation and thriving in life (**Finding 5**). The way we do in schools can perpetuate an impairment that is not inherent within the individual. However, embedded within the current curriculum of exclusion is the ableist assumption that the problem is the student's ability to learn and not the education provided by the school. An embodied curriculum recognizes the value of difference and acknowledges it as normal. When we structure education to bring out the strengths of students, they have a better chance to be successful. To educate students in an environment where they feel valued and are infused with self-worth, all students must be seen as contributing members of their beloved school community. Enforcing these values within the school can encourage students with dis/abilities to see themselves as productive members of a community and encourage other students to see them as friends and collaborators. Within this setting students with dis/abilities are not defined by the sum of their weaknesses, but instead by the strengths they have to offer. When students see themselves as successful and capable of learning, they are more motivated to finish high school, complete post-secondary education, pursue better employment, and seek a more fulfilling life.

To transform our schools into beloved communities of inclusion, the medical model of dis/ability must be rejected for new ideas that foster acceptance. In "Dis/ability as Curriculum Studies and Transformative Praxis," Annamma and Handy (2019) explain,

If disability were conceptualized as a welcomed political identity, instead of a thing to punish for failing to meet standards or something to ignore because of change and

ableism, the behavioural response would be something much more independent, loving, and productive. (p. 456)

Changing the focus from deficit to ability also changes the response to difference. Environments become more welcoming and inclusive when school structures and policies are modified to accept diverse students, instead of requiring students to either conform or be excluded.

This change in perspective also creates mental and emotional space for a “pedagogy of heart” to emerge. A pedagogy of heart prioritizes emotional wellbeing over academic achievement. It requires a holistic approach to inclusion. Yoon (2019) explains,

I argue that *inclusion* requires school structures, educator’s beliefs and practices, interactions with children and their families, and other aspects of everyday systems to be organized around affirming the personhood of students of color with ghosts of trauma and the intersections of race, trauma, identity, and community-building. (p. 421)

As previously discussed, the intersection of race and dis/ability is apparent in the over-identification of African American students as dis/abled. In addition, students with dis/abilities carry with them “[t]he history of institutions’ erasure of complex personhood through state-led exclusion” in education (Yoon, 2019, p. 424) as one source of trauma. Students with dis/abilities also face the trauma of educational violence. Julia Bascom (2012b) describes the common practice in applied behavior analysis (ABA<sup>4</sup>) of requiring “quiet hands.” She states, “[w]hen I was six years old, people who were much bigger than me with loud echoing voices held my hands down in textures that hurt worse than my broken wrist while I cried and begged and pleaded and screamed” (p. 177-178).

“Quiet hands,” like all ABA therapies, are tools to correct “undesirable” behaviors. These behaviors may include aggression toward self or others, but they may also include harmless

practices such as flapping or touching objects/textures that bring comfort or pleasure to the individual. These actions are considered distractions from learning and, possibly in some situations, dangerous. These behaviors are also seen as markers of difference, and in public schools difference is bad; therefore, ABA techniques can be implemented to make students with disabilities appear “normal,” to force assimilation to a standardized form of instruction, and to enforce modification of the student instead of the school structures. How can we value rigid instructional practices, schedules, and building structures over the humanness of our students with learning differences? Prior to subscribing to interventions to allow a student greater access to the current educational environment, we must first evaluate how the environment can be altered to better accommodate the student. As Narayan (2019) asserts in “Precarious, Debilitated and Ordinary: Rethinking (In)capacity for Inclusion,” “[t]he desire for interventions, whether they may be technology or other forms of specialized services, need not be conflated with a desire to simply appropriate ableist norms” (p. 477).

A pedagogy of heart respects the emotional experiences of all students and does not require them to endure violence and de-humanizing practices to achieve “normalization.” We must recognize that the problem does not lay within the student, but is instead a byproduct of socio-political structures, such as capitalism. Roscigno (2009) explains how caring teachers are persuaded to commit these acts of violence upon their students,

The threat of social death is omnipresent and a compelling motivator. The teacher is confronted by the harsh truths of biophilanthropy: the alternative to making live (even through violence) is figural (or literal) death. Within the unrelenting conditions of biopower, the staff is made aware of what is lurking on the other side of the biopolitical vector – an effective strategy to solicit the buy-in of the staff. (p. 411)

Teachers must be better educated about the presence and impact of the social construction of dis/ability and the ableist mentality on the education of students with dis/abilities to be better prepared to resist the implementation of de-humanizing and de-valuing practices. Naraian (2019) advises,

Teacher candidates must *recognize* the disabling, ability-based conditions of schooling that position students marked as different in undesirable ways, *re-orient* their belief systems to accommodate the values of diversity and equity, and adopt a posture of *resistance* to the continued operation of oppressive structures and practices that create inequitable conditions of schooling. (p. 473-474)

The educator is the face, hands, voice, and heart of education. Though we may feel stripped of autonomy in the classroom in response to demands from administration and the boards (local, state, and federal) of education, we must seize upon sites of resistance “in the wilderness,” as Helfenbein (2004) suggests. In our treatment of our students, we can choose to either perpetuate the idea of dis/ability and its inherent deviance and deficiency, or we can choose to encourage acceptance of diverse abilities, experiences, expressions, and ways of knowing. As Annamma and Handy (2019) discuss an “ethic of care,” they explain, “educators are deeply engaged with multiply-marginalized students of colour because they recognize both the individual and systemic oppression those students face....Educators must understand the privilege and power they bring to the classroom” (p. 454).

What can be done to support teacher candidates and current/veteran teachers to develop this recognition, re-orientation, and resistance? In “Crippling Human Rights Education with Disability Studies: An Undergraduate Reading List,” Steinborn and Naubaum (2019) “propose a visibilizing project dedicated to disability justice and liberation take place in undergraduate

classes, where students' perspectives are malleable enough to be shaped" (p. 496). In pursuit of dis/ability justice and liberation, they have created a reading list for teacher candidates titled "Disability and Human Rights Praxis: Intersectional, Interdisciplinary Readings for Educators" that can broaden future educators' understanding of issues of human rights in dis/ability education.

The education experienced by students with dis/abilities is one of frustration, discouragement, and isolation. They deserve to learn in an environment that fosters active learning, creativity, and collaboration, all skills that they can carry forward into the community, post-secondary education, and/or their future careers. They need appropriate instruction that is ability-, not deficit-, focused in an environment that values them as active participants in and contributors to the learning process. All students, regardless of race, ability, sexuality, gender, and socio-economic status, deserve an inclusive education within a beloved community where they are part of an embodied curriculum that is taught with a pedagogy of heart.

Instead of imprisoning the bodies and minds of students with dis/abilities, educators must work with other educational workers such as teachers, administrators, educational staff, parents, students, community workers, and policy makers to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy of caring and justice, cultivate a culturally inspiring school environment, and create hopes, dreams, and equal opportunities for students with dis/abilities and all others to reach their highest potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996) (**Finding 6**). "Nothing about them, without them." In education we must be prepared to work together with parents, students, teachers, administrators, educational staff, community members, and policy makers to create an inclusive culture of caring that envelopes the school in such a way that all students feel inspired and feel that their hopes and their dreams have value. Students with dis/abilities are included fully in the school

environment only when given equal access to an education that empowers them to achieve their highest potential.

In “Dominant Narratives, Subjugated Knowledges, and the Righting of the Story of Disability in K-12 Curricula,” Jessica Bacon and Priya Lalvani (2019) discuss how to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy for students with dis/abilities. To transform the way dis/ability is viewed in education, educators “need to position disability as a form of diversity, as well as a positive group identity” (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019, p. 391). First educators must break the silence surrounding dis/ability by including dis/ability history and issues in the curriculum, teaching the students how to discuss dis/ability including appropriate terminology, and address questions students have about their own or their classmates’ dis/abilities. Educators must also be prepared to address “problematic representations of dis/ability in the curriculum” and in school-wide initiatives (instances when dis/ability is portrayed inaccurately or stereotypically). Critical literacy, questioning the power relationships and “whose knowledge and interests are upheld” (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019, p. 393) in texts, is one method of confronting and disproving “problematic representations of dis/ability.” To avoid these problems in school-wide initiatives, avoid dis/ability simulations which focus on the limitations of individuals with dis/abilities, invite individuals with dis/abilities to share their experiences, and connect with dis/ability organizations that prompt year round awareness, instead of advocating for a cure or elimination of dis/abilities.

Educators have the power to transform a curriculum of exclusion to one embodied with the presence of diverse students. In this space, varied modes of expression and communication of ideas and understandings are encouraged (verbal, visual, technological) schoolwide. The extracurricular programs, additional supports, and classroom instruction is accessible to all

students, regardless if they have an IEP or not. Policy and procedure are co-constructed between all stake holders utilizing collaborative practices. Through inclusive practices, the school and the classroom are a beloved community, not a competition, where students are taught to value diversity and to accept differences as “normal.”

For inclusion to truly work, it cannot be limited to a certain time of day or a certain classroom. Push-in (a practice that moves a student from a self-contained setting to a general education setting for a class period) reinforces the idea of difference between the “special education” student and the other students in the general education room. That student is a guest in a foreign land. Their continued presence there is dependent upon how well the student with dis/abilities assimilates to the demands and expectations of the general education classroom.

The structure of the typical all-day inclusion classroom is just as problematic. In most schools, a single teacher for the grade level is designated to house all students with dis/abilities. Even when placed in the general education setting, these students are still contained within a single classroom, limiting the overall inclusion of students with dis/abilities to a set group of their general education peers. These classes are usually run as a “general education class” with accommodations made for students with dis/abilities as outlined in their IEP. This student would also receive support from a special education teacher or paraprofessional who comes into the classroom, pulls the student to the back of the room, and provides additional instruction and remediation. Both the accommodations and the special education teacher/paraprofessional reinforce the idea that the student is different than his/her peers and that difference is a deficit.

For inclusion to be fully implemented, it must encompass the entirety of schooling (i.e. schedules, fully accessible buildings, integration of students with dis/abilities in all spaces, etc.). Merely offering more inclusive options is not enough. Students with dis/abilities internalize the

ableist rhetoric that insists that they are not smart, that they cannot learn, and that they should not go to college. Therefore, they are unwilling to attempt classes in the college preparatory track. In ‘The More Things Change: Durable Inequalities and New Forms of Segregation in Canadian Public Schools,’ Parekh and Gaztambide-Fernández (2017) explain that

insisting solely on providing different pathways toward graduation is to ignore how such pathways also enforce broader patterns of inequality.... What is more pernicious is that such programs obscure the role of schooling in producing inequality by shifting the focus to students’ choices as the cause of their experiences of failure and/or success. Yet, economic and social stratification are not the inevitable outcome of student choices; they are produced through a systematic channeling of resources and the structuring of pathways that yield particular outcomes. (p. 828)

Inclusion should not be a choice given to the school, the teacher, or the student. It should be the expectation, and it should be implemented in such a way that it can succeed. New ideas cannot be forced effectively into old structures. New ideas require new understandings of students with dis/abilities, their potential, their value, and their place within our schools and communities. Only then, will their educational experiences begin to embody hope, heart, and community.



## EPILOGUE

### **To My Participants**

Seeing you again after four years was a pleasant shock to me. I imagined you all as still the children trapped in time within in confines of my memories. However, you impressed me with the growth, both physically and mentally, you have achieved. Your futures are drawing closer and becoming clearer to you. While I know no one truly “has it easy” in this life, I worry that your paths will be more challenging than those others walk, and I hope you do not become discouraged to the point of hopelessness and give up on your dreams. I am thankful for the opportunity I had to be a part of your lives, even if it was for such a short time.

### **To Kara**

The joy emanating from you daily was always such an encouragement for me in the classroom. Though you may have been shy and uncertain at times, you knew your own mind and you celebrated your successes with your head thrown back and a smile breaking across your face as your hands flapped enthusiastically in the air. As a young girl, you had dreams of becoming a mother one day. As a teenager, your dream has broadened to include a career taking care of infants. Kara, we have seen the evidence of your kindness and generosity of spirit, as well as your ability to learn and master new skills. The potential to reach your dreams has always been within you.

### **To Alvin**

You were always such a serious student. I loved to see the smile brought out of you by your classmates. Your waiting eyes soaked up everything, while your quick mind worked in images. You made me a better teacher when you taught me to listen to your pictures, to recognize them as artifacts of your learning. As you grow older, I hope that you find your place

in this world. A space that appreciates what you have to offer and that encourages you to be yourself.

**To Derek**

You brought to our class a boundless passionate energy. You attacked your work with determination and persistence. Though you were usually happy, excitedly busying yourself with drawing and coloring dinosaurs once the other tasks of learning were completed, you also fearlessly advocated for yourself in the only ways available to you. You questioned the necessity of our rigid schedules and of moving silently through the building as you transitioned at your own pace and volume. I think you knew inherently what I had yet to learn. That many of the rules which I had been recruited to impose upon you were not to facilitate the development of your mind, but to instead condition you to accept a life of limitations. As you grow older, I hope you will continue to have confidence in your right to be part of your school and your community, and that you will continue to insist upon the space and opportunity to be your amazing self.

With love, your teacher,

Ms. Christy

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## APPENDIX

**Technical Terms Used in this Study**

1. GAA: The Georgia Alternate Assessment is the standardized assessment used to assess students taught a modified form of the general curriculum. Typically, these students are educated in a self-contained classroom. The GAA was formerly a portfolio-based assessment in which students were evaluated based on their degree of growth toward mastering a standard. The GAA 2.0 is a paper-based test administered one-on-one to a student that evaluates a student's mastery of a standard. The change in assessment was intended to ensure greater rigor and consistency in the testing of students with significant dis/abilities.

2. Choice in language: When speaking from an embodied perspective, the choice of language must show respect for the self and the body. Within this paper, I am choosing to use people-first language when speaking broadly about individuals with dis/abilities, but identity-first language when speaking directly about Autistic individuals, as argued for by the ASAN (Brown, 2011). I also choose to emphasize the social construction of, and the negative stigma attached to, the idea of dis/ability by separating the "dis" from "ability." In addition, the students within my class, which inspired this study, were considered to have "significant" dis/abilities, thus their exclusion from the general population of students within the county's public elementary school.

Therefore, in this paper, when speaking of individuals with "significant" dis/abilities, I place quotes around the word "significant" to indicate that this is not my term nor my opinion of my students. In fact, I find this term to be highly inaccurate and part of the ableist rhetoric that propagates the idea that difference is abnormal.

3. Unfortunately, due to the lighting, some parts of Derek's drawings are not as clear as I would like for them to be. I took multiple pictures of the drawing following the interview, and I have included the clearest image available.

4. “ABA is the practical arm of behaviorism science, which uses operant conditioning – contingent reinforcement and punishment – to shape behavior” (Roscigno, 2019, p. 405)