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College of Education and Human Sciences

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Walden University

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Abstract

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Inclusive Placement for

Students with Intellectual Disabilities

by

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MA, Grand Canyon University, 2009

BS, St. Louis University, 1992

Project Study Submitted in Partial Project Study

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

In a school district in the southwestern United States, the problem that this study explored was that too many students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. Using Festinger's social comparison theory, the perceptions of middle school teachers, who participated in placement decision making for ID students, were explored by asking about the merits of separate classrooms and the merits of mainstream classrooms. Data were collected using semistructured interviews of 10 purposefully sampled middle school teachers who met the inclusion criteria of being special or general education teachers who worked with and participated in a committee placement meeting for students with ID. Study data was analyzed using a qualitative software program called Dedoose. Study findings indicated the following themes: (a) common practice of placing students with ID into separate classrooms, (b) teachers defer to shared norms and rely on group uniformity, and (c) teachers felt unprepared working with students with intellectual disabilities. The findings revealed the need for professional development for general and special education teachers aimed at serving students with ID in inclusive settings. The implications for positive social change include a benefit to the teachers by developing skills and a cooperative network of support for serving students with ID in more inclusive settings. Consequently, students with ID may be afforded increased access to general education classrooms in the study district.

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Dedication

First, I would like to thank God for sustaining me through this endeavor. In addition, this project study is dedicated to my loving family namely, Joshua and Mackenzie. I could have never completed this study without your love and unwavering support. Thank you for believing in me. I would like to make a special dedication to my husband, Derrick. I am so glad that we took this “journey” together. Congratulations on obtaining your Ph.D.

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Section 1: The Problem

Under the least restrictive environment (LRE) principle, each public agency must ensure “that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities” are “educated with their nondisabled peers unless the nature of the disability is such that education in regular classes even with the use of supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1975, p. 1). Annual state reports detail findings from collected special education data, and the data were made available for public viewing in a report called the Performance-Based Monitoring Report (Texas Education Agency, 2018a). According to this report, a local public report for a southwestern school district under study, current data indicated a pattern that represented a disproportionate number of students with an intellectual disability (ID) placed into the most restrictive classrooms versus lesser restricted settings (Texas Education Agency, 2018a). Over a 3-year period from 2016-2019, the disproportionality among students with ID placed into separate versus mainstream classrooms continued to increase (Texas Education Agency, 2018b). The greatest increase in students with ID placed into separate classrooms occurred between the 2017-2018 academic year (AY) and the 2018-2019 AY (Texas Education Agency, 2017-2018, 2018-2019). In addition, data collected by the Public Education Information Management System database showed a pattern between the number of placements into self-contained classrooms and the occurrence of the special education disability code of ID. The pattern showed that students with ID were overwhelmingly placed into separate classrooms more than any other disability category.

The greatest indication of self-contained placement for students with ID occurred at the middle school level in Grades 6-8 at two schools within the local site. During the 2018-2019 AY, 80% of students with the disability code of ID were placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level at two schools within the local site (Texas Education Agency, 2018-2019). During the 2017-2018 AY, 83% of students with the disability code of ID were placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level at two schools within the local site (Texas Education Agency, 2017-2018). Placing students with ID predominantly into separated classrooms was also the pattern during the 2016-2017 AY as well (Texas Education Agency, 2016-2017). Students with ID at the two middle schools were much more likely than any other disability code to be placed into a separate classroom referred to as a life skills classroom. A life skills classroom is a self-contained classroom where students learn how to manage basic everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene (Chiang et al., 2017). In addition, according to Chiang et al. (2017), life skills students also use a specialized or alternative curriculum focused on academic standards provided at a prerequisite level instead of the general education curriculum that is based on grade level standards.

The issue examined in this study was the over placement of middle school students with ID in separate classrooms instead of integrating them into general education classrooms. The local setting maintained a continuum of placement settings in accordance with federal guidelines to include life skills, autism, behavior academic classrooms, and resource classrooms, which are apart from general education classrooms (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004). I focused on

the two middle schools with the highest percentage of students with ID in separate classrooms at the local site within a large urban school district in the southwestern United States. The practice of placing students with ID predominately into separate classroom settings was a concern because the placement choice may not be beneficial to all students with an ID, and it limits their access to general education classrooms (Morningstar & Kurth, 2017).

According to personal communication with the life skills coordinator in the Department of Special Education Services, when making placement recommendations for students with ID, teachers focused more on the disability labels rather than on individual needs and capabilities (life skills coordinator, personal communication, August 27, 2019). Additionally, placement considerations for middle school students with ID were based on perceptions regarding the label of ID that reflected antiquated and biased placement practices for students with ID (life skills coordinator, personal communication, August 27, 2019).

IDEIA (2004) mandated that “students with disabilities should receive an education with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate in the least restrictive classroom (LRE) setting” (p. 1). Students with ID benefit from spending time in general education classrooms (Cosier et al., 2013). According to Morningstar et al. (2017), students with low incidence disabilities such as autism and ID perform better in inclusive classrooms. Conversely, there is research that describes limited academic benefits for students with ID in general education classrooms. Fuchs and Fuchs (2015) stated that students with ID experience a limited number of benefits in the general

education classroom due to the need to modify instructional programs in inclusive settings.

In alignment with the IDEIA (2004), the state education code included guidelines to local education agencies regarding ensuring that placement decisions of students with disabilities start with the LRE possible (Texas Education Agency, 2017). Because federal and state mandates outlined expectations to place students with disabilities with nondisabled peers, research showed that students with ID have less access to general education classrooms (Cosier et al., 2013). There is a 30-year history globally of students with low incidence disabilities spending most of their instructional day in self-contained classrooms separated from general education classrooms (Morningstar et al., 2017). Across the states, only 17% of students with ID spend time in general education classrooms (Kirby, 2017). There is a significant lack of progress toward inclusion of students with severe cognitive disabilities (Kurth et al., 2014). Inclusion in general education classrooms for students with high incidence disabilities continues to increase; however, this is not the case for students with low incidence disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017). Low incidence disabilities and high incidence disabilities are two categories used in special education to classify disabilities based on their prevalence in general education. Based on the local data, students with a disability code of ID at two middle schools were overrepresented in restrictive classrooms. In this project study I focused on the two middle schools with the highest percentage of students with ID placed into separate classrooms at the local site located within a large urban school district in the southwestern United States. The middle schools are referred to as Campus A and Campus

B throughout this study. The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID.

Rationale

Based on local and state reports containing LRE data, most students with ID at Campus A and Campus B at the middle school level within the district received instruction in separate classrooms (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The number of students who receive instruction in the most restricted classroom setting is monitored by the state department of education and serves as an indicator to examine the educational placements for disability groups (Texas Education Agency, 2018b). The local Public Education Information Management System report showed a disproportionate number of students with an ID placed into self-contained classrooms at the middle school level that presented a concern for the department of special education services, students with ID, and for the district (Texas Education Agency, 2018a). The placement practice trend constituted disproportionality regarding placement practices for students with ID. Guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Education (2017) required local school districts to revise policies, practices, and procedures that result in significant disproportionality in a particular education setting. Additionally, the current placement practices could be detrimental to students with ID at the middle school level by inadequately promoting equitable access to general education classrooms (Olson et al., 2016). According to Olson et al. (2016), life skills classrooms are one type of self-contained classrooms along the special education placement continuum. With respect to

the special education continuum, life skills classrooms are considered one of the most restrictive classroom options because they have limited curriculum options, focus primarily on functional skills, and do not provide an opportunity for students to interact with their nondisabled peers.

By spending most of their time in separate classroom settings, students with low incidence disabilities such as ID were not able to reap the benefits associated with general education classrooms. In general education classrooms, students with severe disabilities have access to varied curriculum choices, expanded learning expectations, and increased opportunity to develop social, academic, and functional skills (Olson et al., 2016). According to Montgomery and Mirenda (2014), the nature of a student's disability and related educational needs may have an impact on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID.

Definition of Terms

Admission, review, and dismissal committee (ARDC): A group comprised of teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and other educators who participate in educational decision making for special education students (Johnson, 2018).

General education: The body of knowledge including state standards and skills that all students are expected to learn (Lowenstein, 2015).

High incidence: A special education disability category that includes specific learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and speech impairment (Harry & Klingner, 2022).

Inclusion: An inclusive environment in which students with disabilities are fully integrated into the school and its community (Bateman & Bateman, 2014).

Intellectual disability (ID): Cognitive disabilities that may range from moderate to severe in nature (Vissers et al., 2016).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): The classroom placement as close to a general education classroom as appropriate for instructional placement (IDEIA, 2004).

Life skills classroom: A life skills classroom is a self-contained classroom where students learn how to manage basic everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene (Chiang et al., 2017).

Low incidence disabilities: Severe disabilities such as ID and autism (Kurth et al., 2014).

Mainstream: Another term for a general education classroom (Sumayang et al., 2022).

Self-contained: The most restrictive special education placement settings for students with disabilities that are separated from general education classrooms (Kurth et al., 2014).

Special education: A customized education plan for students with unique needs (Kauffman et al., 2018).

Significance of the Study

Exploring middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement for students with ID helped identify and address misconceptions concerning placement practices for students with ID. The exploration led to greater access to general

education classrooms as well as improved placement practices for students with ID. The findings from this qualitative project study identified barriers to general education classrooms for students with ID and helped change special education policy within the district as well as provided recommendations for the director of special education to consider.

Research Question

The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. The intent of the research question was to gather the perceptions of middle school teachers who participated in placement decision making for ID students by specifically asking about the merits of separate classrooms and the merits of mainstream classrooms. The following research question and two subquestions were used:

RQ1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B?

SQ1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?

SQ2: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in separated classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

To help understand social comparison and the residual effect upon teacher perceptions, the social comparison theory served as the conceptual framework for this

project study. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory highlights the way social comparisons occur in informal groups and how such comparisons lead to group uniformity. Festinger provided an example of how shared knowledge is developed and reinforced through social interactions. He referred to consensus when individuals have little information individually, so they organize themselves around a shared norm or attitude, which leads to increased social influence and consensus. General attitudes are related to teachers' overall perception of the inclusion of children with different disabilities in mainstream classes and reflect their general view on inclusion as an educational approach (Savolainen et al., 2022). Based on the work of Festinger, social comparisons emerge out of uncertainty and lack of individual knowledge. According to Festinger, individuals experience pressure and feel less confident if derivation group consensus occurs. Social comparison processes play a role in pressure to establish group uniformity.

I found that perceptions held by general education teachers and special education teachers at the middle school level regarding students with ID were influenced by others, shaped by cultural bias, and rooted in personal opinions and beliefs largely due to a lack of understanding and knowledge about working with students with ID in general education settings. In the absence of a defined set of criteria, social comparison is used to determine action and decision making (Festinger, 1954). The research question explored the inconsistent placement practices that middle school general and special education teachers had regarding separate classroom placement for students with ID.

Review of the Broader Problem

A review of the literature was conducted to further examine the historical context of placement practices for students with ID and the relevance of this historical context to the gap in practice explored during this project study. My literature search strategy included locating research articles that were peer-reviewed and published within the last 5 years that detailed previous research relevant to my research topic as well as supported the need to pursue the research question. Most of the articles were located using Google Scholar in conjunction with the Walden Library, which helped widen my search. The predominant databases used to conduct my research were ERIC and Education Source. Both databases allowed an advanced search option that located peer-reviewed articles. Google Scholar allows researchers to use natural language to perform data searches. Using natural language to perform data searches is less taxing than using databases that require more complex search rules. Using Google Scholar allowed me to isolate research articles that were not only relevant to my topic but also to research articles that were peer-reviewed by entering specific search criteria. Using Google Scholar allowed me to have access to any additional reference material associated with an article such as conference proceedings, books, and citations. Search terms included *low incidence disabilities, ID, LRE, IDEA, stigma, parent advocacy, life skills classroom placement, teacher training, Festinger, teacher perceptions, social comparison theory, and decision making.*

To understand the need to explore the separate classroom placement practices at the middle school level, it was necessary to review the literature and expound upon the

historical background of students with low incidence disabilities. This section emphasizes the influence of perceptions upon placement practices documented throughout the course of history for students with ID. A review of the literature regarding life skills placement, teacher perceptions, and training needs is also provided.

Stigma and ID

Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities have historically been at considerable risk for social exclusion and other vulnerabilities (Feaster & Franzen, 2021). Stigma is defined as negative attitudes or discrimination (Werner & Abergel, 2018) This stigma has affected persons with ID in many different settings such as in the community, hospitals, and schools (Simplican, 2019). One attempt to change the negative perceptions associated with cognitive disabilities was to change the disability category term from mental retardation to ID. The intent of the change in terms was to invoke a shift in mindset regarding ID from an emphasis on the negative to an emphasis on the positive. Terms equated with mental retardation include moron, idiot, imbecile, and mentally deficient. Overall, the term mentally retarded came to reflect inability and resulted in the marginalization of people. The negative attitudes regarding ID are due to a profound misunderstanding about the disability. This misunderstanding has led to labels and negative reactions. To date, ID still evokes feelings of dislike and disbelief, ambiguity, tautology, and fear (Cluley, 2018).

Persons with ID have been labeled as incapable of making progress in life and unable to lead productive lives (O'Byrne & Muldoon, 2017). Public labels can have a tremendous impact. Labels tend to dictate the lives of those labelled, especially when

connected to a stigma (Cluley, 2018). Placement decisions for students with severe disabilities have often been based less on the students' unique learning needs but more on beliefs and presumptions about student learning, entrenched school district policies that restrict program delivery options, and other variables unrelated to student needs (Agran et al., 2020). Previous studies explored the perceptions of groups of people regarding their feelings about ID (Werner & Abergel, 2018). According to Cluley (2018), shared skepticism exists among groups of people regarding ID. In the absence of robust public dialogue about disability and lack of opportunity to interact with mixed-ability groups, public understandings often reflect stereotypes and misconceptions that compose expert narratives on disability (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). If a wider body of knowledge is not provided regarding ID, then it could remain connected to a negative connotation (Cluley, 2018).

Individuals without experience working with students with severe disabilities may only have the perception of others to rely on, which may represent an outdated view (Agran et al., 2020). There has been a great deal of evolution regarding students with ID (Agran et al., 2020). The shift has been from a label that carried a stigma, namely, mental retardation, to the adoption of a term that was chosen to represent and highlight the capabilities that persons with ID have (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Parents and organizations have advocated for the opportunity for students with ID to move beyond separate classrooms and to have increased opportunity to participate in lesser-restricted environments (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). The federal government has also passed and implemented legislation to support this initiative as well; however, inclusion for students

with ID into general education classrooms continues to lag behind other disabilities (Kauffman et al., 2021). Over a span of 60 years, there has been some change; however, there has not been enough to reflect a momentous change within schools (Agran et al., 2020). The stigma associated with first the term mental retardation and ID has prompted both parents and organizations to join forces and collaborate in an effort to dispel widely held beliefs and increase opportunity and access for students with ID (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). The work on behalf of parents and organizations began by examining thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of the public regarding students with cognitive and developmental disabilities (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Instead of “reproducing marginalizing discourses about the disabled or other vulnerable minorities, we can work with them to make a more equitable society through more equitable language” (Adler et al., 2017, p. 117). The view and treatment of students with ID has changed over time, as is discussed in this paragraph. As stated above, a change from using stigmatizing terms like “mental retardation” to terminology that is more empowering occurred. More students with ID should be included in general education classes, according to parents, groups, and government initiatives. Despite some advancement over the past 60 years, the text implies that more significant change is still required. The joint efforts of parents and organizations stress the value of inclusive language and societal inclusion to dispel myths and broaden opportunities for students with ID.

History of Segregation and Exclusion of Students with ID

Based on a review of the literature, a long-standing practice of placing students with ID in separate schools and classrooms has been in existence for more than 30 years

(Morningstar et al., 2017). Across the United States, only 17% of students with ID spend time in general education classrooms (Kirby, 2017). Additionally, there is a significant lack of progress toward inclusion of students with severe cognitive disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Inclusion in general education classrooms for students with high incidence disabilities continues to increase; however, this is not the case for students with low incidence disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017). The practice of automatically placing students with ID into self-contained classrooms was commonplace due to a perception that students with ID require extensive personal care needs, accommodations, and instructional modifications (Kleinert, 2020). Many educators believed that students with cognitive disabilities would not be able to thrive in inclusive settings. Therefore, placement decisions rested solely on disability labels resulting in many students attending separate schools or institutions. If all students with a specific disability code automatically require placement in a particular classroom setting, it can prove harmful to the student (National Council on Disability [NCD], 2018). This type of decision making led to the emergence of separate centers and classrooms at a rapid pace (Kleinert, 2020).

The NCD conducted a study and (a) described the legal and scientific basis for an inclusive versus segregated education, (b) summarized national patterns for educating students with disabilities in general education classes, (c) examined federal and state guidance and state compliance with federal mandates, (d) described effective educational practices for reducing segregation, and (e) provided findings and recommendations for improvement. The NCD study findings indicated that often the LRE mandate was not

applied during the placement decisions for students with cognitive disabilities and states collect their own individual data to examine.

Parents as Advocates

Beginning with in the 1960s, parents along with agencies such as the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC), an organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, advocated for the opportunity for their children with ID to have access to general education classrooms and to receive their education alongside of their nondisabled peers (Spaulding, 2022). Throughout the 1970s, the routine practice was to educate students with ID in separate classrooms and separate schools (Brock, 2018). Parents led the fight for change for their students (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). They insisted throughout the years that their students were capable of learning and should have access to general education classrooms (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Parents fought to end subjecting students with cognitive disabilities to exclusion from school, institutionalization, and other devaluation (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020).

The literature about ARC chronicles court cases originated by parents to gain access to general education classrooms for their students with disabilities. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), this monumental case marked the beginning of legal policy regarding special education (Kirby, 2017). The U.S. Supreme Court noted in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (as cited in Kirby, 2017, p. 178). This case paved the way for the development of new federal legislation regarding special education such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL-94-142). Following the Education for All Handicapped Children Act,

the Pennsylvania ARC filed a lawsuit against the state of Pennsylvania, which questioned the exclusion of students with ID from receiving an education alongside their peers (Kirby, 2017).

Organizations Working to Include Students with ID

After years of advocacy predominantly on behalf of parents, many organizations emerged to help improve public perceptions regarding people with ID (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). One organization that has worked on behalf of persons with ID is ARC (Spaulding, 2022). To reflect progressive thought regarding persons with cognitive disabilities ARC changed their name to the Association for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (Spaulding, 2022). The organization has been committed for many years to changing the public mindset regarding children with cognitive and severe disabilities (Spaulding, 2022). After forming a group of parents and others, ARC made a concerted effort to advocate for change for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Spaulding, 2022). The mission of ARC was to shift the focus from the disability to the abilities and strengths that students with ID possess (Spaulding, 2022).

A significant accomplishment that resulted from the advocacy of parents and organizations was increased federal policy and oversight, improved and increased rights, and expanded opportunities for people with ID (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Organizations have worked tirelessly to expand opportunity for inclusion in many areas of life not just regarding education (Spaulding, 2022). Using data, organizations have seen the slow amount of growth that has occurred over the years regarding access to inclusion classrooms for students with ID (Spaulding, 2022). Students with ID remain mostly

separate into restricted classrooms (Zagona et al., 2022). Some of the organizations have been responsible for lobbying the federal government to pass legislation to help increase access for students with ID into inclusion classrooms (Spaulding, 2022). Associations like ARC have launched and conducted their own research to try to determine why the rate of inclusion for students with ID occurs at a slow pace (Spaulding, 2022). Even with advocacy and legislation, the rate of inclusion remains minimal (Zagona et al., 2022). This paragraph highlights the noteworthy successes brought about by parents' and organizations' advocacy efforts on behalf of people with ID. As a result of their efforts, federal policies have been strengthened and ID holders now have more rights and opportunities. These initiatives go beyond schooling and cover many facets of daily living. These organizations have tracked the slow improvement in giving students with ID access to inclusion classrooms by using statistics. The rate of inclusion is still relatively low despite their lobbying and research efforts, which have involved groups like ARC, showing that difficulties still exist in completely integrating kids with ID into conventional educational environments.

Despite efforts on behalf of organizations, public perceptions regarding the inclusion of persons with ID still reflect outdated perceptions and organizations continue to work directly with school districts regarding increased participation for students with ID in general education classrooms (Morningstar et al., 2017). One organization that has taken on this challenge is the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). SEAC collaborated directly with school districts in order to help remove barriers that exist and minimize access to general education for ID students (IDEA, 1975). Like many other

organizations, the intended mission was to change the attitudes, actions, and thoughts regarding students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. SEAC believed that attitudes and thoughts drive actions or inaction (IDEA, 1975). Recently, one of the primary initiatives of the organizations was to examine the public perceptions held by individuals with cognitive and developmental delays (Spaulding, 2022). By examining perceptions, the organizations were able to advocate for policies to help bring about change. Many approaches have been taken to increase inclusivity for students with ID within school districts (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). Organizations continue to fight for change and increased opportunities for ID students (Spaulding, 2022). This paragraph emphasizes how, despite the efforts of numerous organizations, there are still outmoded beliefs held by the general public on the inclusion of people with ID in general education classes. To identify and remove obstacles to access for ID kids, organizations like SEAC have actively worked with school districts. Since these elements affect whether inclusive practices are used, their purpose is to alter attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs toward students with intellectual and developmental impairments. These groups have recently concentrated on researching public opinion to support legislative reforms. Numerous strategies have been used to improve inclusion in school systems, and organizations are still pushing for reform and more opportunities for ID children.

Federal Laws

Increased pressure from parents and agencies such as the ARC prompted the federal government to pass legislation increasing access to general education classrooms for students with disabilities (Kirby, 2017). Public Law 94-142 was a precursor to the

IDEIA (1997). Public Law 94-142 was a major step toward inclusion for students with disabilities as they were guaranteed a free and appropriate education (Valle & Connor, 2019). The main goal of PL 94-142 was to end the practice of special education as an exclusionary place. The term LRE originated out of the PL 94-142 policy (Kirby, 2017).

The LRE policy mandated that all students with disabilities receive their education with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Underwood, 2018). The LRE policy marked a significant change in special education. The intent of the LRE policy was that students with disabilities should have access to the full placement continuum to the maximum extent appropriate (Underwood, 2018). New terms emerged out of the LRE policy such as *mainstream* and *inclusion* (Underwood, 2018). *Inclusion* refers to the practice of educating and accessing students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in general education classroom settings (Esposito et al., 2019). *Mainstream* refers to general education classroom placement for students with disabilities (Underwood, 2018). Despite parent advocacy and federal laws, students with severe disabilities still do not have equal access to general education classrooms; inclusion remains elusive for students with severe disabilities (Imray & Colley, 2017).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

One of the most revolutionary pieces of federal legislation was IDEA (1975). IDEA was a result of decades of parent advocacy in collaboration with organizations dedicated to changing public perceptions and increasing inclusion for students with disabilities. Notable lawsuits such as *Brown vs. the Board of Education* provided a springboard for legislation such as IDEA. IDEA replaced Public Law 94-142, which was

known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142). IDEA provided protection for students with disabilities and ensured certain rights. Protections included in IDEA helped to end the trend of educating students with ID at separate educational facilities, which was a widely held practice.

According to Agran et al. (2020), many educators believed that it was not possible to educate students with ID with their peers due to the severity of disabilities and the amount of care required. IDEA legislation solidified a dissent from the notion of separate schools for students with ID. IDEA allowed an opportunity for parents to have a voice in the individualized education plan (IEP) that was created and implemented for their children. Another significant component of the IDEA legislation was free and appropriate education for students with disabilities that ensured that students with disabilities were provided with a free and appropriate public education (IDEA, 1975). The paragraph goes through how opinions and laws addressing the education of individuals with ID have changed over time. Given the severity of their disabilities and the level of care required, many instructors in the past thought it was impractical to educate students with ID alongside their peers. The IDEA law, however, refuted this idea and gave parents the chance to participate in the development and implementation of their children's individualized education plans (IEPs). Additionally, IDEA placed a strong emphasis on offering students with disabilities a free, suitable education in order to guarantee them access to equal educational opportunities.

Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act

IDEA (1975) was reauthorized to include additional amendments to ensure equal access in 2004 and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). Under IDEIA, students with disabilities were able to receive an IEP that outlined the support and services that they would need to access and be successful in the general education classroom (IDEA, 1975). Six significant concepts resulted from IDEA (1975): (a) free and appropriate education, (b) appropriate evaluation, (c) IEPs, (d) LRE, (e) parent participation, and (f) procedural safeguards.

A major component of IDEA was the LRE mandate. Under LRE, each public agency must ensure that to the “maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers unless the nature of the disability is such that education in regular classes even with the use of supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA, 1975, p. 1). LRE applies to placement into separate classrooms as well.

The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers’ perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. According to Agran et al. (2020), a presumption exists that practitioners consider general education first during placement decision making for students with the most severe disabilities (Agran et al., 2020). There is a lack of research data regarding students with ID and participation in general education classrooms largely due to the lumping of disability categories, and a gap in the literature exists regarding students specifically with ID (Morningstar et al., 2017).

When considering placement for students with disabilities, each IEP team member brings their own knowledge and expertise (Bateman & Chard, 2019). The intent of the LRE mandate was individualization to meet the unique needs of each student (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). What is considered the LRE for one student may not be appropriate as the LRE for another student (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). Even though students with ID historically were aligned to a stigmatized disability label that was perceived to need a separate classroom or facility, LRE placement decisions should not be based on the disabling condition, convenience of the school, or the cost of support needed to maintain the classroom (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). LRE considerations should be based on student data and the needs of the student (Bateman & Chard, 2019). It is necessary to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding life skills placements for students with ID since teachers are an essential part of an IEP team.

LRE

Despite federal education policy initiatives, a review of the literature indicates a current concern remains regarding placement among students with ID and access to general education classrooms (Morningstar et al., 2017). Hornby and Kauffman (2021) examined the interpretations of the LRE policies and special education. Additionally, Hornby and Kauffman (2021) offered guidance to help educators avoid creating a least restrictive placement practice that is illegal or untrustworthy and attempted to bring clarity to the LRE principle. The LRE principles are applied inconsistently due to different views regarding application and interpretation (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). Bateman and Chard (2019) detailed the ways in which the principles of the LRE have

been misinterpreted: (a) federal government, (b) interpretation of policies, and (c) implementation of policies was highlighted (Bateman & Chard, 2019).

Students with ID are not just separated from their peers, they may also be isolated from general education classrooms. Broderick (2018) outlined restrictiveness not just in terms of separation from nondisabled peers but also as separation from the general education curriculum. Agran et al. (2020) provided a critical analysis of the practices that perpetuate segregation among students with ID.

Interpretations of LRE

From the onset, the verbiage contained in the LRE principle provided by the federal government left room for a great deal of interpretation (Maag et al., 2018). According to LRE, students should be placed with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Hornby and Kauffman (2021) examined the interpretations of the LRE policies and special education. According to a study conducted by Brock (2018), in recent years there has been little-to-no evidence of progress toward lesser restrictive classroom settings for students with ID, and Brock concluded that additional research is necessary especially regarding IEP teams and advocates for inclusive classrooms. He analyzed federal placement data over a 40-year span. His study showed that placement decisions made for students with cognitive/ID most often resulted in separate or self-contained classrooms. Other factors outside of individual student characteristics were considered during placement decisions.

The interpretation of the LRE mandate is made by campus administration and confusion surrounds the implementation of the LRE mandate (Hornby & Kauffman,

2021). Stefanski et al. (2022) found that internal forces influence the actions of participants in placement decision making due to the confusion surrounding the implementation and understanding of the LRE mandate. Stefanski examined how the interpretation of LRE has evolved and how the focus on LRE has shifted from inclusivity to quality of instruction. The variance regarding the interpretation of the LRE mandate can have serious implications on placement decisions for students with ID (Matthies, 2019).

Many principals do not receive any type of formal training regarding special education policy or laws during their preparation programs. Campus administrators could be the driving force during placement meetings for students with disabilities; however, they may not have a clear understanding of what the LRE policy means for all students (Stefanski et al., 2022). Stefanski referred to the principal's ability to decipher special education policies as sense-making and said that sense-making is the ability to move beyond basic interpretation and to dig deeper into actual meaning. Many factors play a role in how people arrive at conclusions such as internal representation, beliefs, values, and assumptions. His work further illustrated the need to explore the perceptions of teachers who participate in the placement decision making for students with ID. Some administrators believed that by allowing students to participate in extracurricular activities while continuing to provide instruction only in self-contained classroom was a way to meet the requirement of the LRE mandate; however, this practice still prevents students with ID from accessing the general education curriculum (Stefanski et al., 2022).

Additionally, other misinterpretations of the LRE mandate included sending nondisabled peers into the self-contained classrooms to work directly with students with ID as a way to provide LRE. Sending nondisabled peers into the self-contained classroom was considered inclusion. Cornett and Knackstedt (2020) noted that ambiguity and confusion regarding what is considered as the LRE for a student with severe disabilities can impede access to general education classrooms. Due to the varied interpretations of access to general education, it is necessary to examine the perceptions held by teachers regarding segregated classroom placement for students with ID.

Life Skills Classroom Placement

There is a great deal of research on exploring the perceptions of teachers regarding inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms; however, the gap in practice locally is that too many students with ID are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. Locally, students with ID are placed into life skills classrooms, which is a type of separate classroom setting. Life skills classrooms are self-contained classrooms for students who require significant communication, physical, and cognitive support. Instruction in a life skills classroom setting is generally focused on semi-independent living skills, basic academic content, repetitive tasks, and practical skills (Twyman & Heward, 2018).

In many life skills classrooms, a functional curriculum is used and focuses on transportation, independent living skills, community access, vocational education, and social skills (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017). Exploring the perceptions of middle school

teachers regarding separate classroom placement may provide insight as to why in over 60 years of advocacy, legislation and attempts to change an outdated mindset, that overwhelmingly students with ID continue to spend most of their school day in separate classrooms. Students with ID continue to experience placement in the most restricted instructional settings along the special education placement continuum (Zagona et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of placing students with ID predominately into self-contained classrooms remains a topic for further research. To date, there has been limited research conducted regarding this phenomenon (Morningstar et al., 2017). Continuum refers to placement options that vary regarding restrictiveness (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2021). Prior research has focused primarily on lack of access to general education classrooms instead of exploring the perceptions of teachers who participate in placement decisions to examine their beliefs specifically regarding life skills placement (Morningstar & Kurth, 2017). Exploring this phenomenon may lead to the disclosure of contextual factors that can be addressed to decrease the amount of ID students who spend most of their day in self-contained classrooms (Metsala & Harkins, 2020).

Zagona et al. (2022) proposed that placement decision making might focus predominantly on policies, practice, and perceptions about students instead of focusing on the strengths and abilities that the student may have. The focus remains on the disability label and the attached stigma associated with it and reflects an outdated mindset more so than a true reflection and data driven communication regarding the student's capabilities when making placement recommendations (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). No

assumptions are considered that not all students with ID should be placed in separate classrooms. Indeed, there are appropriate student placement recommendations for separate classrooms.

Benefits of Access to General Education Classrooms

A review of the literature showed that when given the opportunity to participate in general education classrooms, some students with ID thrive and improve academically (Timberlake, 2020). Comparison studies detailed the instruction provided in self-contained classrooms for students with ID versus instruction provided in general education classrooms (Gilmour et al., 2019). According to research, students with ID who receive their education in self-contained classrooms often receive poor instruction and have very little access to the general education curriculum (Zagona et al., 2022). In separated classrooms, students with ID are often not afforded the opportunity to receive instruction beyond their assessed grade level equivalency (Kirby, 2017). Literacy instruction in segregated contexts (i.e., special education classes or other activities in which only students with disabilities are present) is typically limited in scope, diversity of materials, and language experiences (Ruppar et al., 2018).

There is a solid and growing research base supporting grade-aligned literacy instruction in general education contexts. More than 93% of students with significant disabilities in the United States are excluded from general education settings. Therefore, students who have an ID and poor literacy skills are disproportionately denied access to the general education contexts where they are most likely to gain those skills (Ruppar et al., 2018). Ruppar et al. conducted a comparative research study that examined the

performance of students with ID in inclusive classroom settings compared to the performance of students with ID in self-contained classrooms. Ruppert et al. (2018) also conducted a quantitative study surveying 39,837 students from 15 states and concluded that students with severe cognitive disabilities could effectively learn in general education classrooms. Students with ID acquire both social and academic benefits from exposure to general education classrooms.

Teacher Perceptions

Students with ID have been segregated and regarded as one homogeneous group when it comes to placement practices and inclusion into general education classrooms (Kirby, 2017). To decrease this practice of segregation, initiatives from parent advocates, agencies, and federal policies have been instituted (Kirby, 2017). Unfortunately, segregated placement policies have done little to remedy the problem to date necessitating additional research on potential contributing factors and solutions (Dever, 2021). Teacher perceptions can have an enormous impact upon educational reform (Dejene et al., 2018). Prior experiences, background knowledge, family history, cultural competency, and community can help shape teacher perceptions and influence their decision making (Metsala & Harkins, 2020).

According to Lalvani and Bacon (2019), a pattern of making educational placement decisions for students with ID by homogenous labeling exists. Additionally, a conceptualized stigma is attached to the term ID (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). An association may be made between the label and the individual with a disability who may be judged and treated according to this label (Werner & Abergel, 2018). In most

instances, referrals for special education are based on teacher perception rather than data (Dever, 2021). Prior research studies explored the perceptions of teachers as they related to increased inclusion and academic instruction for students with cognitive disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017). There is a gap in local practice regarding identifying perceptions that may be influenced by cultural bias, administrator influence, and teacher inexperience by teachers who participate in placement decision making for ID students that serve as a barrier to general education classroom access.

Researchers have studied the perceptions of educators in relation to having students with disabilities in their inclusive classroom settings for over 20 years (Miller, 2017). To date, a lack of qualitative research exists regarding teacher perceptions about placement for students with ID in life skills classrooms. Exploring this phenomenon may lead to increased access to general education classrooms for students with ID, as well as improve placement decisions that move beyond disability labels and consider student data and documentation, as required by federal law.

Research has been conducted historically, that explored the perceptions of teachers regarding access to general education classrooms as well as providing academic instruction in general education classrooms to students with significant cognitive disabilities (Miller, 2017). Teachers are an essential change agent for educational reform and play a pivotal role in achieving successful change in an educational environment (Brown et al., 2021). However, there is limited qualitative research regarding the perceptions of teachers who participate in placement practices and the impact of those perceptions upon the placement decision making process for students with ID (Negash,

2019). Obtaining the perceptions of teachers regarding separate versus inclusive classrooms could identify training needs and personal bias leading to less restrictive classrooms.

Training Needs for Teachers

Research indicates a need for training for teachers who work with students with severe cognitive disabilities. Many educational researchers would agree that “the lack training can create a hesitancy to include students with ID in the general education classroom setting” (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017, p. 44). Metsala and Harkins (2020) examined the teachers’ sentiments, attitudes, and concerns regarding inclusion of students with developmental disabilities into general education classrooms: “Teachers indicated a need for training, resources, and supports when working with students with developmental disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting” (p. 178). Additionally, there is a need for additional research regarding a possible correlation between negative teacher sentiments and beliefs concerning students with severe disabilities and access to inclusive classroom settings (Metsala & Harkins, 2020). The majority of surveys conducted regarding teacher sentiments concerning inclusion have focused more on students with emotional or learning disorders.

Byrd and Alexander (2020) expressed a need for continued professional development geared toward general education teachers. However, teachers expressed a need for professional development that includes in class coaching, knowledge concerning special education programs and processes, and strategies for working with students with low incidence disabilities (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Instead of addressing all the

challenges that may arise when working with students with ID in general education settings, some decision making is geared toward avoidance of anticipated obstacles. Olson and Roberts (2020) described a middle school campus that was able to effectively include students with severe disabilities in the general education classrooms. They focused on the actions of the middle school personnel as the single factor of success and developed a shared interpretation of what access to general education entailed. To support implementation of general education access for all, a support structure for teachers was created as an ongoing resource. The support structure had a multi-layered system that was comprised of ongoing professional development, teacher collaboration, and shared responsibility. Agran et al. (2020) discussed several factors needed for successful inclusion of students with extensive support needs in general education classrooms. Some of the factors included strategic instructional strategies, identification of instructional content, and a willingness to implement federal legislation.

Implications

The implications of this study could lead to the development of professional development training sessions regarding placement practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The professional development sessions would be geared toward teachers who work with students with ID. The professional development training sessions would be created to address the needs discovered after data analysis. The training sessions could help decrease and eliminate fear and hesitancy regarding working with students with ID in inclusive classroom settings. Implications of this study could also lead to the creation of a decision-making matrix to help guide all members of admission,

review, and dismissal committee (ARDC) regarding placement practices for students with ID.

Positive social change may occur for students with ID through increased access to general education classrooms. In general education classrooms, students with severe disabilities have access to varied curriculum choices, expanded learning expectations, and increased opportunity to develop social, academic, and functional skills (Olson et al., 2016). Positive social change could result in revised special education policy that focuses on the improvement of placement practices for students with ID. Positive social change could also occur when general education teachers have ongoing support and training regarding working with students with ID in their classrooms. When general education teachers are provided with foundational skills and ongoing professional development and support, they will be more comfortable, confident, and more willing to include students with ID in their classrooms.

Summary

The problem that this study explored was that too many students with ID are placed into segregated classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. The research question in this project study asked, "What are middle school teachers' perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B?" Based on a review of the literature, a long-standing practice of placing students with ID in separate

schools and classrooms has been in existence for many years (Morningstar et al., 2017). The conceptual framework guiding this project study was Festinger's social comparison theory. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory explored the way social comparisons occur in informal groups and how such comparisons lead to group uniformity.

In summary, the review of literature for this project study included two areas: (a) previous research regarding the exploration of teacher perceptions and (b) a historical perspective regarding access to general education classrooms for students with disabilities. Early research illustrates a multitude of research regarding teacher perceptions related to providing instruction to students with ID in general education classrooms; however, a need remains to explore the perceptions of teachers who participate in the placement practices for students with ID as a reason why most students with ID are placed into self-contained classrooms.

In Section 2 of this basic qualitative study, I will provide a detailed description of the research methodology used. In addition, I will explain the choice of research design used. Section 2 also contains the criterion used to select participants for the project study and the measures put in place to ensure the protection of participants. Justification for the data collection method and the procedure used are also provided. Lastly, in Section 2, I provide a detailed description of the data analysis process that was used in this project study. In Section 3, I describe the project genre selected. Section 4 discusses an account of the project's strengths and limitations.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

The problem that I explored in this study was that too many students with ID are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. Out of the possible qualitative approaches, I used a basic qualitative design. A qualitative research design is a logical choice for this type of study. Qualitative research designs allow for human experience, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). One of the primary goals of a basic qualitative research design is to uncover and to interpret meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The use of a basic qualitative research design allows for the identification of the thoughts and perceptions held by the middle school teachers participating in the interviews during the study. The use of a basic qualitative research design to address the phenomenon studied will be provided throughout this section.

The research question in this project study asked, “What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B?” The subquestions explored the perceptions of middle school teachers who participate in placement decision making for ID students by asking about the merits of separate classrooms and the merits of mainstream classrooms. The objective of the research question was to elicit rich detail concerning the beliefs held by middle school teachers regarding the barriers and merits of separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID that will help address the research phenomenon. To accomplish the collection of rich descriptive detail

regarding the perceptions held by middle school teachers, I used a basic qualitative research design. A basic qualitative research design assumes that phenomena under investigation is mediated, emergent, and open to interpretation (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). A basic qualitative research design is an approach that allows for the systemic inquiry of a social phenomenon in a natural setting by examining a collection of thoughts, experiences, and interactions from study participants regarding their first-hand accounts of lived experiences (Teherani et al., 2015).

A qualitative research design is a logical choice for this type of study. Qualitative research designs allow for human experience, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). One of the primary goals of a basic qualitative research design is to uncover and to interpret meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The use of a basic qualitative research design allowed for the identification of the thoughts and perceptions held by the middle school teachers participating in the interviews during the study. Other research designs previously considered include a quantitative research design and the mixed methods research design. Qualitative research is more fluid and less distinct than quantitative designs; therefore, a quantitative design was eliminated (see Lodico et al., 2010). A mixed methods research design was rejected since a need to converge data sources to greater understand the research problem was not necessary (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Whereas both research methods would allow the ability to test, refine, and develop a theory, only the qualitative research design supports the research question, data collection, and data analysis needed for this study. Unlike the other research designs, a qualitative research design is the best approach to explore the

research phenomenon using interviews. A phenomenological research design that focused solely on data obtained through interviews over a long period of time was also considered. It was not selected since the goal of a phenomenological study is to capture and identify the essence of the phenomenon, whereas a basic qualitative study allows the opportunity to capture the emotional connection to the phenomenon directly from the participants during the interview process. Originally, a case study research design was considered. A case study design would be a great choice if the study included boundaries such as time or place. Therefore, I selected a case study research design because the focus was not on a single bounded system.

The following research question and two subquestions guided this study:

RQ1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B?

SQ1: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?

SQ2: What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in separate classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?

Participants

The selection process to obtain participants included a purposeful sample at each school campus. The purposeful sampling technique is a type of nonprobability sampling that is efficient when a researcher needs to study a specific cultural field (Ames, 2019). When using a purposeful sample, individuals are chosen for study who can enhance comprehension of the research problem and focal point, which is the central phenomenon

of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). All study participants were identified using a purposeful sampling technique at each campus. According to Patton (2015), “You’re hoping to elicit relevant answers that are meaningful and useful in understanding the interviewee’s perspective” (p. 471). To be included in the study, participant criteria included teachers who were employed at either Campus A or Campus B and who worked with students with ID. Potential participants were also either a general or special education middle school teacher who participated in ARDC placement meetings for students with ID. A total of 10 middle school teachers collectively fitting the inclusion criteria received an invitation to participate in the study at Campus A and Campus B. The target participant recruitment goal was a minimum of at least 10 interview participants that was commensurate with the level of inquiry pursued. All participants were interviewed by telephone. As part of the recruitment effort, informed consent was obtained from each participant to fully disclose the purpose of the project study as well as to address any questions from participants.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the study participants, providing an overview of key information such as pseudonym assigned, gender, type of teacher, and years of experience. Knowledge of these characteristics regarding the participants is essential for gaining insight into their perspectives and experiences regarding the topic of this study. Table 1 offers a snapshot of the diverse group of participants involved in the study, capturing essential information about their professional background and expertise. Knowledge of this information can help contextualize the findings and consider how the

participants' characteristics may have influenced their perspectives and responses throughout the study.

Table 1

Study Participant Demographics

Participant name	Gender	Type of teacher	Years of experience
P01	F	General education	3
P02	F	Special education	9
P03	M	General education	3
P04	F	General education	23
P05	M	Special education	20
P06	F	General education	18
P07	F	Special education	10
P08	F	Special education	37
P09	F	Special education	21
P10	F	General education	20

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

Prior to collecting data, I obtained permission to conduct research from Walden University's Internal Review Board (IRB; #08-21-20-0582651). I shared the Walden IRB approval number with the appropriate district stakeholders. I obtained participants' email addresses through open public records. Next, using my Walden email address, I sent a

recruitment letter to the potential participants electronically. Participants replied electronically to indicate their interest in participating in the study and provided their preferred email for me to use for subsequent communications. I sent participants who indicated an interest in participating in the study a copy of the consent letter and obtained consent prior to scheduling the respective interview.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

In qualitative research, trust between the researcher and participant is critical (Taquette et al., 2022). I focused on building trust through being transparent regarding my role and the purpose of the study. In order to gain access to participants, potential participants provided email addresses obtained through the open records' public campus directory. Contacting potential participants directly via email allowed me to build rapport with participants by providing open and honest communication. An existing prior working relationship with campus administrators did exist. The nature of the existing working relationship with campus administrators consisted of communication, collaboration, and support. I consistently clarified my role as researcher from the role in which they knew me in the study district. Furthermore, to minimize and neutralize any potential bias, I implemented several strategies.

Several strategies were used to establish and maintain the researcher-participant working relationship and concurrently contributed to the data quality. One of these strategies included the use of a reflective journal to help keep my focus directly on the words stated by the study participants. Researchers' findings suggest the use of reflective journals can effectively capture descriptions and explanations of individual experiences

as they adapt to new organizational roles and settings (Lutz & Paretti, 2019). I also used the reflective journal to recall interview details, and to record biases, and personal experiences during the data collection and analysis process (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Another strategy that I used was member checking that includes sharing the draft findings with study participants to obtain input from the participants regarding the researcher's analysis of the information obtained (see Busetto et al., 2020). I used a transcript review strategy that refers to the practice of checking back with study respondents to see if the transcript content is in line with their views (Busetto et al., 2020). Specifically, the transcript review consisted of each participant examining a copy of their printed interview for accuracy whereas, member checking involved the participants reviewing my own initial data gathering and analysis. I used both transcript review and member checking during this study.

To promote an effective researcher-participant working relationship, I obtained informed consent from each participant in order to fully disclose the purpose of the research study as well as to address any questions from participants. Informed consent included a description of the confidentiality and participants' rights protections afforded to participants during this basic qualitative study (see Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I provided participants with sample interview questions and conveyed to participants that I was available to answer any questions they had regarding the research process or study. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants to protect confidentiality. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary individual collecting information, hence building trust with the participants is central to maintaining the credibility of the data collected and to

protecting participants' rights (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I consistently followed the interview protocol and use of probes. I initiated each interview with the intention of building rapport, trust, and helping the participant to feel relaxed and comfortable about sharing openly regarding the phenomenon being studied.

Protection of Participant Rights

Once Walden IRB approval was granted, I followed the approved IRB process as described in the IRB application. I shared the Walden IRB approval number with the appropriate district stakeholders and proceeded to obtain potential participants' names through open public records. I emailed the recruitment letter to the potential participants and followed up with a consent letter describing the consent process to those potential participants indicating an interest in participating in the study. I obtained informed consent and scheduled an interview for each participant during a noninstructional time period. Prior to initiating each interview, I reminded participants that they had received a copy of the consent form to print or save for their files.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The informed consent outlined measures that were used to protect the rights of all participants. All participants were notified in advance that all interviews were strictly voluntary and did not have any connection to their job performance appraisals; this information was listed in the consent form. Participants were also notified regarding their right to withdraw consent to participate in the study at any time. Participants were also notified that their recorded information would be kept confidential and immediately destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Protective measures were implemented that included participant confidentiality, rights, and safety from harm. Maintaining confidentiality regarding study participants involved the use of pseudonyms and avoidance of any personal identifiers to protect the identities of the participants. Preserving the confidentiality of participant data is a primary consideration (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Participants were informed that data collected from participant interviews would be stored on a password-protected personal computer in a secured online data storage program for a period of 5 years and then be destroyed per the Walden IRB requirements (Walden University, 2018). I am the only person with access to participant data.

Data Collection

In this basic qualitative study, I collected information from 10 general and special education teachers who had knowledge of students with ID and had participated in an ARDC meeting for an ID student. The primary data collection instrument for this study was semistructured interviews. The researcher-designed interview protocol was aligned to the research questions and subquestions. I also used a reflective journal (Draissi et al., 2021) to capture reflections, connections, and to dispel preconceived notions of the phenomenon being studied based on personal experiences. Semistructured interviews, with the use of probes, allowed for the collection of experiences, perceptions, and descriptions from participants regarding the phenomenon studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

All interviews were also recorded using an app on my cell phone called Tape-A-Call Pro. Both the recordings and the audio transcripts from the recordings were stored in

accordance with expectations outlined in the informed consent document provided to study participants in advance. Other instrumentation used consisted of a reflective journal, Dedoose, which was a digital qualitative analysis program. The Dedoose program allowed me to quickly identify codes, relationships, and patterns among collected data. To ensure data integrity and accuracy, strategies such as the use of a reflective journal and member checking were also used (see Lutz & Paretti, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Instrumentation

I designed an interview protocol with input from my committee to ensure alignment and sufficiency of the interview questions to address the research question and subquestions. I used open-ended questions to support obtaining rich, thick descriptions from the participants regarding the phenomenon being studied (see Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Teherani et al., 2015). The use of semistructured interviews as a data collection tool allowed me to capture the thoughts and perceptions held by middle school teachers who work with students with ID. These middle school teachers were either a general or special education teacher who participated in ARDC placement meetings for students with ID and identified the merits of separate classrooms versus the merits of general education classrooms for students with ID, which is consistent with a basic qualitative research design in terms of employing one instrument to collect data. Informed consent was obtained from each participant to fully disclose the purpose of the project study as well as to address any questions from participants prior to conducting the scheduled interview.

Each of the telephone interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were audiotaped. The interviews were held according to the agreed upon time and place established between the participant and me. All interviews were conducted after work hours when the participants were in a private location in their homes away from the workplace. I developed an interview protocol framework that ensured rich, meaningful data were collected. During the telephone call, participants provided rich details necessary to answer the research questions. According to Brinkmann (2015), interviews conducted in a conversational mode provide a fruitful way of understanding the human predicament. Using a conversational mode during interviewing may require frequent checks for shared understanding by asking clarifying questions (Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were held according to the agreed upon time and place established between me and the participant. All interviews were conducted after work hours when interviewees were in a private location in their homes away from the workplace. I developed an interview protocol framework that was used to ensure that rich, meaningful data were collected.

During the semistructured interviews, I used a recording app called Tape-A-Call Pro on my cell phone. The recording application also created a word-for-word transcript of every interview session held via telephone. The informed consent given to each research participant explained that a recording device would be used during the interview. All interviews were recorded to ensure that every rich detail provided by participants regarding the merits of separate classrooms and the merits of general education classrooms for students with ID was captured. The recorded interviews were

transcribed and will be maintained on my personal password protected computer for a period of 5 years following the conclusion of the study. After 5 years, the recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed in accordance with the specifications outlined by Walden University IRB guideline (Walden University, 2018). The interviewee transcriptions were coded and saved using a pseudonym on my password-protected computer accessible only by me. Preserving the confidentiality of participant data is a primary consideration (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

I used a reflective journal during the interview as I listened intently and kept my focus directly on the words of the interviewee. The reflective journal allowed me to track the need for additional clarification and notate any type of confusing language. I selected a reflective journal so that I could capture my own thoughts and feelings during the interviews. The use and intent of the reflective journal was outlined in the informed consent form provided to each research participant. Using a reflective journal was another method used to decrease the possibility of personal bias.

Interview Questions

The interview questions used during the interviews conducted via telephone were crafted to investigate teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms as well as exploring the merits of placing students with ID in separate classrooms. I developed the interview questions in alignment with the research question and subquestions. The interview protocol framework used was developed in collaboration with my doctoral committee. The interview protocol was aligned to the research question and subquestions. Aligning the interview protocol with the research

questions supported clarity and was a way to ensure the sufficiency of the data collection tool's ability to address the research questions. The interview questions connected directly to the research questions since both were geared for the collection of the perceptions and experiences of middle school teachers who participate in placement decision making for ID students and helped provide answers to the research questions. At times, it was necessary to use probes/prompts to garner clarification from study participants such as, "Can you tell me more about your thinking?" and "Can you give me an example?" The responses obtained from participants regarding their perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID and their perceptions of the merits of both placements were sufficient to reach saturation and obtain insight into the problem being explored in this basic qualitative study. Table 2 reflects the alignment of the research question, subquestions, and interview questions.

Table 2

Interview Question Alignment with Research and Subquestions

Interview questions	Research/subquestions
Questions: 1, 2, 6, 7, and 11	RQ1
Questions: 3, 4, 5, and 12	SQ1
Questions: 8, 9, and 10	SQ2

The development of interview questions was carefully considered in order to design a protocol that would address the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. The interview questions connected directly to the research question and the subquestions. Whereas both were geared for the collection of the perceptions and experiences of middle school teachers, both also helped provide answers to the phenomenon studied.

I recruited participants through purposeful sampling and included only participants who met the inclusion criteria specified for this study. The 10 participants for this study were self-selected into this study and confirmed they met the inclusion criteria and demonstrated they had knowledge of students with ID and placement decisions for this student population. Saturation was reached after conducting 10 interviews as no new information was emerging from the interview process. Thus, I discontinued the recruitment and interview process after reaching saturation.

Role of the Researcher

I currently work as a school district administrator for the district referenced in this study. I oversee professional development and curriculum and instruction within the department of special education services, which does not present a conflict with my role as the researcher for this project study. I have worked at the local public school district for the past 10 years as district administrator in the special education department. To minimize and neutralize any potential bias on my behalf, several strategies were implemented. The strategies included the use of a reflective journal to help keep my focus directly on the words stated by the study participant. Another strategy used was

member checking. Member checking involved allowing the study participant to review my interpretation of the initial data gathering.

All interviews with study participants were held in a professional manner. No power struggles or personal conflicts occurred between me and the study participants. Protocols were in place to avoid ethical issues or concerns as well as any undue influence exerted by the researcher. I addressed all ethical concerns encountered with this study. Data were collected outside of the workday.

In my administrative role at the central office in the study district, I engage with educators throughout the district in a support role; however, I do not have any supervisory authority over any of the study participants. I do have an existing working relationship with district middle school campus administrators. The nature of the existing working relationship with campus administrators consists of communication, collaboration, and support needed regarding special education local policy. My relationship with campus administrators did not pose a conflict with data collection from middle school teachers. In my administrative role, I did not have any existing relationships with the district middle school teachers who were participants in this study.

Member checking is an integral part of creating trustworthiness in qualitative research (Candela, 2019). During the member checking and transcript review process, study participants were asked to review a copy of their transcribed interview for accuracy and completeness as well as reviewing a copy of my own initial data gathering. Discussions were held concerning strategies, specifically the use of a reflective journal and member checking used to lessen the occurrence of personal bias. To promote an

effective researcher-participant working relationship, informed consent was obtained from each participant that fully disclosed the purpose of the research study as well as addressed any questions from participants. Informed consent included the amount of privacy and protection afforded to participants during surveys and interviews (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The transcript review consisted of each participant examining a copy of their printed interview for accuracy, whereas member-checking involved the participants reviewing my own initial data gathering and analysis. Both processes were used during this study to ensure data accuracy and integrity.

Qualitative research designs allow for human experience, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A basic qualitative research design provided the foundation for both the data collection and the data analysis process during this study. One of the primary goals of a basic qualitative research design is to uncover and to interpret meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consistent with a basic qualitative research design, the beginning of the data analysis process began with the use of semistructured one-to-one telephone interviews. During the telephone interviews, the phone calls were recorded using a cellphone application called Tape-A-Call Pro. The Tape-A-Call Pro program also produced a transcript of each telephone call. Following each interview, the data were immediately transcribed by the Tape-A-Call Pro app and a text file was created. The text files were immediately printed out and made available for study participants to verify accuracy. I also maintained a printed copy of the transcribed telephone call. The data management program used during the data analysis process was Dedoose (2021), a qualitative research data coding and analysis software program. This

data management program allowed me to manage and organize collected data. The data management program added a layer of security for the storage of the data collected. The data management program also helped me analyze the collected data to answer my research questions. The collected data were kept confidential as well as the identification of research participants.

To ensure that essential details did not get omitted, I used a reflective journal during interview sessions. The reflective journal allowed me to track the need for additional clarification and any notated type of confusing language. The information captured in the reflective journal included key words used in a repeated manner. The reflective journal also contained information regarding facial gestures, voice intonation, and emotional reactions. Overall, the findings confirmed my use of reflective journals facilitated critical thinking, metacognition, and self-engagement (Draissi et al., 2021). The reflective journal also allowed me to organize the collected data. After the interview, I was able to go back and review my notes in the reflective journal and engage in reflective thought regarding the data collected. Journaling can be used to provide a data set of the researcher's reflections on the act of performing the research (Shufutinsky, 2020).

Data Coding

With a basic qualitative research design, the process of analyzing data is called coding. During the coding process, data were analyzed, and codes, categories, and themes were identified. During this process, patterns were also discovered, and relationships uncovered. During the coding process, I prepared the data for analysis by converting all

the recorded interviews from the digital recorder into a text file. Some of the transcripts were coded right away; however, others took a little longer to transcribe due to the need for further clarification. The entire transcription process took several weeks to complete.

The coding process that I used was consistent with the coding process defined by Merriam (1998) and stated: “Our analysis and interpretations—our study’s findings—will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place” (p. 48). The coding process had multiple phases. The first phase of the coding process occurred immediately after each interview. During this phase, each transcript created during the recording of the individual interviews was printed and manually reviewed. I meticulously read through every transcript. During reading, I used a highlighter and created annotations to refer to later. During this manual review process, patterns found in participant responses were highlighted, notations were made regarding repetitive codes that began to emerge. Some patterns identified included repeated words and phrases. The codes were short descriptions of responses provided by study participants. An example of this process was the repetitive use of the following codes: (a) disability label, (b) stigma, and (c) social exclusion. I made annotations regarding the relationship among the codes.

The second phase of the coding process involved the use of a software program called Dedoose (2021), which was a qualitative software program used for data analysis and coding. The text files used with the Dedoose program were the transcripts created during the recorded interviews. The transcripts were uploaded into the Dedoose program and once the transcripts were uploaded into the Dedoose program, I was able to open and

review each one individually. The Dedoose program allowed me to identify additional codes from the collected data, and the program illuminated frequently used codes quickly. Additional codes illuminated by the Dedoose program included: (a) negative connotation, (b) self-contained, (c) one-to-one instruction, (d) paraprofessionals, (e) community-based instruction, and (f) self-contained placement. The Dedoose program also allowed for the identification of correlations between codes, which allowed me to begin to identify categories.

The third phase of the coding process involved a shift from code identification to category development. The focus of category development was to capture and group the codes identified during the analysis of the participant transcripts and the reflective journal. Using the Dedoose software program, I was able to identify repeated words and phrases among codes to identify categories. For example, the following identified codes: disability labels, stigmas, common trend, negative connotation, and social exclusion resulted in the following categories: discrimination, bias, and placement considerations. After two rounds of open coding, I identified both X and Y codes using the Dedoose software. Within the Dedoose software program, there are two important descriptor fields, X and Y, which help researchers organize and categorize their data. The X descriptor field is used to label the data based on specific categories, whereas the Y descriptor field is used to further subdivide the X categories. The X and Y descriptor fields help researchers to sort and analyze data in a more organized and meaningful way, making it easier to draw conclusions and insights from the data. I reviewed the codes, looking for patterns and combined codes that seemed to be representing a similar thought.

Consequently, X categories and Y themes emerged from the data analysis of the transcripts.

Data Analysis Results

The research problem that this study explored was that too many students with ID were placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. In this section, I present the results of the study that align with the research question and subquestions that guided this study. The interview questions used during the interviews were crafted to investigate teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms as well as exploring the merits of placing students with ID in separate classrooms. The interview questions connected directly to the research question. Throughout this section, I share participant responses. To protect the confidentiality of study participants, respondents are referred to with a specific pseudonym. For example, P8 represents respondent number 8. Detailed participant responses are shared as they relate to the research question and the subquestions.

For this study, I focused on the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding placement practices for students with intellectual disabilities. To analyze the data obtained during this study related to the perceptions of the teachers, I used thematic analysis. A way of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data is referred to a thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). During my first round of coding, that

involved reading the transcripts word for word, repetitive codes began to emerge. Some patterns identified included repeated words and phrases. The codes were short descriptions of responses provided by study participants. An example of this process was the repetitive use of the following codes: (a) disability label, (b) stigma, and (c) social exclusion. I made annotations regarding the relationship among the codes. I used the Dedoose program to identify additional codes from the collected data. After reviewing all the codes identified, I assigned categories. I collapsed the Round 2 codes into seven categories. For example, from the following identified codes: disability labels, stigmas, common trend, negative connotation, and social exclusion resulted in the following categories: discrimination, bias, and placement considerations. Next, the categories were consolidated to form summarizing phrases or themes.

I identified seven themes by examining the similarities and differences among the perceptions collected from the middle school teachers regarding placement practices for students with intellectual disabilities: (a) common practice is placing students with ID into separate classrooms (b) teachers defer to shared norms and rely on group uniformity (c) teachers feel unprepared working with students with intellectual disabilities (d) greatest benefit is socialization (e) variety of benefits are derived from mainstream classrooms (f) specialized classrooms are better equipped, and (g) specialized classrooms focus more on student IEPs. Three themes support research question 1, two themes support subquestion 1, and two themes support subquestion 2. The comprehensive analysis of codes, categories, and emergent themes is a crucial aspect of any research study (Williams & Moser, 2019). For the sake of exactness, a transcript review was

conducted that involved allowing the study participants to review a printed transcript from the recording of the interview to ensure accuracy. I also used member checking. Member checking involved allowing the study participant to review my interpretation of the initial data gathering. Member checking is a reflective space for participants (Candela, 2019). Table 3 presents a comprehensive and detailed list of the codes, categories, and emergent themes related to research question 1 identified during my analysis.

Table 3

Codes, Categories, and Emergent Themes Related to Research Question 1

Codes	Categories	Emergent themes
Disability labels, stigmas, common trend, negative connotation, social exclusion, limited ability, and high needs	Discrimination	Common practice of placing students with ID into separate classrooms
	Bias	Teachers defer to shared norms and rely on group uniformity
	Placement considerations	Teachers feel unprepared working with students with intellectual disabilities

Research Question 1

The first research question explored middle school teachers' perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B. During the interviews, I was able to gather information regarding the

perceptions of middle school teachers regarding placement practices for students with ID. I was also able to gather information regarding past experiences working with students with ID from study participants. Participants shared the role of data when making placement considerations for students with ID as well as other supporting documentation used with placement decision making. Participant data were gathered from 10 middle school teachers who participated in classroom placement meetings for students with ID. Based on participant responses to interview questions aligned to the research question, codes were identified and developed. The themes emerged from the repeated words and phrases along with identified patterns derived from participant response data. Teachers shared perceptions regarding (a) working with students with ID, (b) the placement process for students with ID, (c) the role of data when making placement decisions for students with ID, (d) other considerations when making placement recommendations for students with ID, as well as (e) the number of years of experience working with students with ID.

Patterns emerged as teachers perceived their thoughts regarding separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B. The following codes were identified: (a) disability labels, (b) stigmas, (c) common trend, (d) negative connotation, and (e) social exclusion. Three themes emerged to support the research question: (a) common practice was placing students with ID into separate classrooms, (b) teachers deferred to shared norms and relied on group uniformity, and (c) teachers felt unprepared working with students with intellectual disabilities.

Theme 1: Common Practice of Placing Students with ID into Separate Classrooms

The first theme that emerged supporting the research question was the common belief expressed by teachers that there was a routine practice of placing students with ID into separate classrooms on their campuses. The prevailing perception among teachers reflected a systemic approach to placement practices for students with ID that was based on disability labels. Based on participant responses, there were several reasons why a common practice of placing students with ID into separate classrooms existed. Participant responses showed a reliance on preconceived notions and stereotypes perpetuated by disability labels.

Participants expressed a practice of placing students into separate classrooms due to a lack of professional training. For example, Participant 6 commented, “training should be provided by the district and continued throughout the school year.” Additionally, Participant 5 stated, “training sessions provided did not focus on intellectual disabilities.” Therefore, several teachers felt like they were not properly prepared to deal with students with ID adequately in their classroom. Many participants expressed that professional development would help them expand their knowledge base and feel more comfortable working with students with intellectual disabilities.

According to Francisco et al. (2020), special education refers to a variety of instructional strategies that are implemented by qualified special education teachers and are not typically seen or used by untrained teachers in a regular classroom because they are specifically created to meet the needs of students with disabilities who have special learning needs. Study participants voiced that although they attended many professional

development training sessions within the school district, many of them were not relevant to working with students with ID. Additionally, many of the participants stated that they felt undertrained and did not understand the correct strategies to support students placed into their classrooms. Participants communicated that for professional development to be effective, it would need to be continuous and provided throughout the school year. Based on participant responses, the professional development sessions could help them learn instructional practices that would benefit students with ID in mainstream classrooms. Research also shows that professional development that is sustained over time, job-embedded, and focused on specific student needs can lead to improvements in student achievement and teacher practice (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Participants expressed defaulting to a practice of placing students into separate classrooms due to a lack of specialized knowledge needed to work with students with ID. Public labels can have a tremendous impact. Labels tend to dictate the lives of those labelled especially when connected to a stigma (Cluley, 2018). The default practice on campus was placing students into separate classrooms due to their disability label. Placing students with ID into self-contained classrooms by default deprive them of the chance to participate in inclusive settings. The practice of automatically placing students with ID into self-contained classrooms was commonplace due to a perception that students with ID require extensive personal care needs, accommodations, and instructional modifications (Kleinert, 2020). Participant 3 commented, “teachers are not specialized and not able to work with students with ID.” Likewise, Participant 6 stated, “without training, teachers feel inexperienced working with students with ID.”

Additionally, other participants remarked that dealing with students with intellectual disabilities requires specialized knowledge and a level of expertise due to their unique needs and the specific instructional strategies required. Metsala and Harkins (2020) examined the teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns regarding inclusion of students with developmental disabilities into general education classrooms: "Teachers indicated a need for training, resources, and supports when working with students with developmental disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting" (p. 178). Several participants commented that if training were provided, they would feel better equipped to support students with ID. Participants expressed a need to understand the characteristics of intellectual disabilities regarding learning styles, strategies, and support.

Study participants described that another common practice used to place students with intellectual disabilities into separate classrooms was due to a belief that students with ID could not adjust to the lesson pacing in general education classrooms. According to Agran et al. (2020), many educators believed that it was not possible to educate students with ID with their peers due to the severity of disabilities and the amount of care required. Participant 4 remarked, "students with ID are not able to keep up in mainstream classes. The pace is too fast even with accommodations." Moreover, Participant 8 commented, "mainstream classes cannot adequately accommodate students with ID." Participants stated that even with IEP accommodations in place, students with ID are not able to keep up with the general education curriculum used in mainstream classrooms. Overall, there was a tendency to defer to placement practices based on disability labels when an absence of direct experience and a lack of professional development existed.

Based on the challenges faced by students with ID in mainstream classrooms, the prevailing theme that emerged showed that teachers often deferred to shared norms and relied on the concept of group uniformity, which influenced their placement decisions regarding classroom placement.

Theme 2: Teachers Defer to Shared Norms and Rely on Group Uniformity

The second theme supporting the research question was the common belief expressed by teachers that they defer to shared norms and rely on group uniformity when working with students with ID. Participant 1 commented, “general education teachers on my campus follow common practices regarding students with ID on campus.” Likewise, Participant 5 remarked, “general education teachers rely on special education teachers when making decisions regarding students with ID.” In the absence of robust public dialogue about disability and lack of opportunity to interact with mixed-ability groups, public understandings often reflect stereotypes and misconceptions that compose expert narratives on disability (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). A lack of knowledge coupled with a lack of training can help perpetuate stereotypes.

Study participants perceived that their views regarding students with intellectual disabilities were shaped by an interplay between social interactions with colleagues and the influence of prevailing public stereotypes. However, the focus remains on the disability label and the attached stigma associated with it and reflects an outdated mindset more so than a true reflection and data driven communication regarding the student’s capabilities when making placement recommendations (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). Study participants acknowledged that their attitudes toward students with ID were influenced by

the impact of prevailing public stereotypes. Teachers perceived that they tended to defer to shared norms and group uniformity during the placement decision making for students with ID due to a lack of firsthand knowledge and experience working with students with ID. Participant 1 further commented, “few general education teachers have direct experience with students with ID.” Additionally, Participant 7 expressed, “general education teachers tend to conform to common practices on campus when interacting with students with ID.” Individuals without experience working with students with severe disabilities may only have the perception of others to rely on, which may represent an outdated view (Agran et al., 2020). Study participants acknowledged that their attitudes toward students with ID were influenced by prevailing public stereotypes, and that they tended to defer to shared norms and group uniformity when placing students with ID. Furthermore, participants expressed a lack of preparedness when working with students with ID.

Theme 3: Teachers Felt Unprepared Working with Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The third theme was the common belief expressed by teachers of being unprepared when working with students with intellectual disabilities. The predominant focal point shared by study participants was not feeling knowledgeable or experienced when working with students with ID and that feeling uneasy or uncomfortable created hesitancy regarding inclusion of students with ID into mainstream classrooms. Woodcock and Hardy (2017) indicated a need for training for teachers who work with students with severe cognitive disabilities. Participant 6 stated, “the most challenging aspect of working

with students with ID in the classroom was learning how to adapt the curriculum to address the wide range of academic performance levels found among students with ID.” Participant 6 further expressed, “being unprepared regarding providing accommodations and modifications to the curriculum for the students with ID in classroom.”

Additionally, Participant 4 discussed that teachers were underprepared due to “the challenge of becoming aware of every student’s way of learning.” Several participants commented regarding the need for more training sessions provided to general education teachers who may or may not have any experience working with students with ID prior to their arrival in the general education classroom. For example, Participant 6 further stated, “training should be provided by the district and continued throughout the school year.” Participant 4 further asserted, “general education teachers need an onsite trainer to teach me how to teach students with ID.” The ideas shared by the teachers provided insight regarding hesitancy regarding inclusion of students with ID into mainstream classrooms. Participant 3 remarked, “general education teachers are not specialized and not able to work with students with ID.” Concerns were shared regarding students with ID ability to keep up with the pace of mainstream classrooms. Participant 4 remarked, “students with ID are not able to keep up in mainstream classes. The pace is too fast even with accommodations.” Several teachers expressed hesitancy regarding inclusion of students with ID into mainstream classrooms, stating that general education teachers are not specialized and not able to work with students with ID. In the next section, the emergent themes related to subquestion 1 will be discussed. Table 4 provides a visual reference of the codes, categories, and themes related to subquestion 1.

Table 4*Codes, Categories, and Emergent Themes Related to Subquestion 1*

Codes	Categories	Emergent themes
Social benefits, variety of benefits, access to the general education curriculum, and peer models	High classroom expectations Supportive classroom environment	Greatest benefit is socialization Variety of benefits from mainstream classrooms

Subquestion 1

The first subquestion explored middle school teachers' perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms at Campus A and Campus B. Teachers shared their perceptions regarding (a) what students with ID need in order to be successful in general education classrooms, (b) supports needed when working with students with ID in general education classrooms, (c) professional development sessions attended regarding working with students with ID, and (d) the barriers to students with ID when participating in general education classrooms. Several themes emerged from patterns identified in participant responses that informed SQ1. The themes included: (a) greatest benefit is socialization and (b) a variety of benefits from mainstream classrooms.

Theme 1: Greatest Benefit is Socialization

The first theme describes the greatest benefits for mainstreaming students with ID is socialization. The data analysis process showed that the predominant benefit to students with ID from participation in mainstream classrooms is socially driven. Participant 2 remarked, "students with intellectual disabilities are able to practice social

skills in mainstream classrooms by interacting with their nondisabled peers.” In addition, Participant 9 commented, “students with ID learn social norms and how to build relationships when they are able to participate in mainstream classrooms.” Participant responses suggest that inclusion in mainstream classrooms can provide students with ID opportunities for social interaction and development that they might not otherwise have. Social inclusion is intentionally including students with ID into inclusive classrooms in order to help prepare students for society but also to help improve attitudes regarding students with ID by students, parents, and teachers (Mironova et al., 2019). Participants perceived that including students with ID into mainstream classrooms provides the opportunity for social inclusion. Participants recalled occurrences in which students with ID were able to form friendships with their nondisabled peers while participating in mainstream classrooms. Participant 10 stated, “students with ID benefit from socialization with age-appropriate peers.” Participant 5 commented, “in general education classrooms, students with ID benefit from socialization and helps with their overall development and maturity.” Some of the identified codes included: social benefits and peer models. The data analysis process showed that the predominant benefit to students with ID from participation in mainstream classroom is socialization. Students with ID can practice social skills and learn social norms. Besides socialization, study participants voiced additional benefits for students with ID when participating in mainstream classrooms.

Theme 2: Variety of Benefits from Mainstream Classrooms

The second theme supporting the first subquestion describes a variety of benefits students with ID experience from mainstreamed classrooms. The participants expressed a collective belief that students with ID derive significant advantages from interacting and engaging with their nondisabled peers in mainstream educational settings. According to Participant 8, “students benefit from general education classrooms through exposure to social skills by watching the actions of others.” Furthermore, Participant 3 commented, “when students with ID participate in mainstream classroom and social activities, they are less likely to feel isolated and lonely.” Middle school teachers perceived several merits that students with ID benefit from when placed into mainstream classrooms. For a child with disabilities, socialization is also seen as the process and outcome of mastering the knowledge and abilities of social life (Borisova, 2019). Participants emphasized that not only do students with ID gain social skills in mainstream classrooms, but they also help promote a culture of acceptance and inclusivity. Many teachers believed that students with ID could learn from peer support in mainstream classrooms. Participant 1 remarked, “students with ID learn how to interact with others from exposure in mainstream classrooms.” Participant 9 commented, “students with ID benefit from exposure to soft skills needed for the workplace in mainstream classrooms.” Participant responses showed that not only do students with ID gain social skills benefits from participating in mainstream classes but also acceptance and inclusivity. In the next section, the themes that emerged from subquestion 2 will be detailed. Table 5 provides a visual reference of the codes, categories, and themes related to subquestion 2.

Table 5*Codes, Categories, and Emergent Themes Related to Subquestion 2*

Codes	Categories	Emergent themes
Life skills, alternative curriculum, small group, one-to-one instruction, barriers, paraprofessionals, specialized training	Lower classroom expectations	Specialized classrooms are better equipped
community-based instruction	Specialized classroom environment	Specialized classrooms focus more on student IEPs

Subquestion 2

The second subquestion asked middle school teachers about their perceptions regarding the merits of placing students with ID in segregated classrooms at Campus A and Campus B. Two themes emerged from patterns identified in participant response data: (a) specialized classrooms are better equipped and (b) specialized classrooms focus more on student IEPs. Participant responses indicated that specialized classrooms tend to have the necessary resources, tools, and trained staff needed for the unique needs of students with ID. Participants highlighted that separate classrooms allow for one-to-one instruction and smaller class sizes, which can benefit students with ID. The smaller group sizes and individualized instruction enable students to have their specific needs addressed. Based on responses, teachers can adapt their teaching methods and provide personalized instruction specifically tailored for students with ID. Based on responses, in separate classrooms, instruction can be provided at a slower rate, allowing students to grasp concepts at their own pace. Study participants emphasized that students with ID can

engage in hands-on learning, utilize manipulatives, and experience the advantages of smaller class sizes in segregated classrooms.

Theme 1: Specialized Classrooms are Better Equipped

The first theme describes how specialized classrooms are better equipped to support students with ID. Participant 3 expressed, “students with ID required a large amount of supports that are most likely found in specialized classrooms.” Likewise, Participant 5 remarked, “special education teachers in self-contained classrooms have received the training needing to meet the needs of students with ID.” Instruction in a life skills classroom setting is generally focused on semi-independent living skills, basic academic content, repetitive tasks, and practical skills (Twyman & Heward, 2018). Participant responses indicated that separate classrooms are more likely to be a better fit for students with ID.

Study participants consistently emphasized the advantages of placing students with ID in separate classrooms. For example, Participant 7 commented, “in separate classrooms, students with ID can benefit from one-to-one instruction and smaller class sizes.” Participant 6 remarked, “students benefit from smaller group sizes and one-to-one instruction.” The codes were Life Skills, alternative curriculum, small group, one-to-one instruction, barriers, paraprofessionals, and specialized training community-based instruction. Data analysis showed that study participants felt that separate classrooms (self-contained) were better equipped for students with ID since a large amount of support such as staff and specialized instruction is typically found in separate classrooms.

Not only did participant responses voice support for separate classrooms but also, indicated that separate classrooms also target more on student IEPs.

Theme 2: Specialized Classrooms Focus More on Student IEPs

The second theme supporting the second subquestion describes how specialized classrooms focus more on student IEPs emerged as a theme from study participant data. Participant data highlighted the perception that specialized classrooms provide a more tailored educational approach that centers on the needs and goals that are outlined in the IEPs of students with ID. According to Agran et al. (2020), many educators believed that it was not possible to educate students with ID with their peers due to the severity of disabilities and the amount of care required. Participant 10 commented, “students with ID receive instruction that is geared more toward their level of learning and focused more on their success.” Teachers expressed that separate classrooms allow teachers to focus more on the student’s IEP. Participant 5 stated, “in separate classrooms, instruction can be more specific, and goals/needs provided at a slower pace and students receive individualized, specialized instruction.” Additionally, teachers noted that they then had the ability to place students into small groups with assistance and to scaffold instruction and modify assignments. Participants indicated that the focused attention students with ID could receive in specialized classrooms could lead to more effective learning outcomes and progress for students with ID. Participant 4 commented, “students with ID can receive hands-on learning, use manipulatives, and experience smaller class sizes in separate classrooms.” The participant responses suggested that separate classrooms offer an opportunity for students with ID to receive individualized, specialized instruction that

caters to their specific needs. Based on participant responses, separate classrooms tend to offer the opportunity for students with ID to receive individualized, specialized instruction that caters to their specific needs. Also, teachers in separate classrooms are able to create individualized learning plans that included the necessary supports and resources outlined in student IEPs. The next section will provide a summary of the findings and outcomes identified during the data analysis process.

Summary of Findings and Outcomes

Based on the research question and subquestions, I analyzed the perceptions collected from the 10 middle school teachers interviewed in this study. The research question explored, “What middle school teachers’ perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B?” Patterns emerged as teachers perceived their thoughts regarding separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B. The following codes were identified: (a) disability labels, (b) stigmas, (c) common trend, (d) negative connotation, and (e) social exclusion resulting in the themes for RQ1, which were: (a) common practice of placing students with ID into separate classrooms, (b) teachers defer to shared norms and rely on group uniformity, and (c) teachers felt unprepared working with students with intellectual disabilities. The themes resulted from the analysis of participant data that showed relationships and patterns regarding a need for training, lack of specialization, struggles in the mainstream classes, dependency on onsite support, and highlighted the importance of ongoing support. Multiple quotes highlighted the need for training to support teachers in effectively educating students with

ID. Data indicated a potential gap in expertise regarding working with students with ID. Another pattern that emerged from participant data that was related to the identified themes indicated that students with ID may face challenges in keeping up with the pace of mainstream classes and indicates a perceived mismatch between the instructional pace in mainstream settings and the individual learning needs of students with ID.

Analysis of SQ1 investigated, “What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in mainstream classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?” and identified several patterns and relationships among participant responses. The data analysis process from interconnected shared thoughts that the predominant benefit to students with ID from participation in mainstream classrooms is socially driven. Teachers shared their perceptions regarding (a) what students with ID need in order to be successful in general education classrooms, (b) supports needed when working with students with ID in general education classrooms, (c) professional development sessions attended regarding working with students with ID, and (d) the barriers to students with ID when participating in general education classrooms. Several themes emerged from patterns identified in participant responses that informed SQ1. The themes included: (a) greatest benefit is socialization and (b) a variety of benefits from mainstream classrooms.

Analysis of SQ2 focused on, “What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about the merits of placing students with ID in separated classrooms at Campus A and Campus B?” Two themes emerged from patterns identified in participant response data. The themes were that specialized classrooms are better equipped and specialized classrooms

focus more on student IEPs. Some of the identified patterns identified include: (a) one-to-one instruction and smaller class sizes, (b) meeting individual needs, (c) specific instruction, (d) slower pace, and (e) individualized/specialized instruction. The relationships and patterns that emerged from analysis of participant data centered around the benefits found in specialized classrooms for students with ID. Participants had similar responses regarding benefits, such as individualized attention and personal instruction, the ability to tailor lesson plans to meet the individual goals and needs of students, and the ability to adjust the pace of instruction to ensure comprehension and progress. Responses collectively emphasized the advantages of separate classrooms in meeting the specific needs of students with ID. While the responses mostly agreed on the merits of separation, there was a slight variation. Some responses focused on individualized instruction and adjustment of teaching methods, while others emphasized hands-on learning, use of manipulatives, and the experiential benefits of smaller class sizes.

In conclusion, through analysis of study participant data, responses show that in the absence of direct experience, study participants perceived knowledge of students with ID was derived from social interactions and group uniformity with others, which aligns with Festinger's theory of social comparison. Middle school teachers' perceptions about separate classrooms versus mainstream classrooms for students with ID at Campus A and Campus B were examined considering Festinger's social comparison theory. Festinger's theory emphasized how shared knowledge is developed and reinforced through social interactions and the consensus of opinion. The study findings revealed that when teachers lacked individual knowledge and direct experience with students with ID, they tended to

rely on shared norms, attitudes, and group uniformity. This reliance on shared information emerged from a lack of individual knowledge and uncertainty. The study participants defaulted to perceived notions and stereotypes about students with ID due to limited direct experience and a lack of dialogue regarding disability. This reliance on shared norms and attitudes can occur when teachers lack the necessary knowledge and training to support students with ID. Placement decisions for students with severe disabilities were often influenced by beliefs and presumptions rather than on the students' unique learning needs. However, participants consistently believed that students with ID benefit socially when included in mainstream classrooms. This study also highlighted the need for direct training, resources, and support for teachers in mainstream classrooms to effectively work with students with ID. The findings suggest that professional development could help address hesitancy and enhance teachers' abilities to support students with ID, aligning with the principles of Festinger's social comparison theory. Table 6 provides a visual reference of the emergent themes, aligned social comparison theory, and the research/subquestions.

Table 6

Emergent Themes, Aligned Social Comparison Theory, and Research/Subquestions

Emergent themes	Aligned social comparison theory	Research question and subquestions
Barriers to access to mainstream classrooms	Shared norms Social comparison	RQ1, SQ1, and SQ2
Socialization	Consensus of opinion	RQ1, SQ1
Specialized classroom	Shared norms or attitudes	RQ1, SQ2

The findings serve as the foundation for a professional development training program for both special education and general education teachers designed to help increase the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms. The next section provides a description of the project designed to help both general and special education teachers work successfully with students with ID in mainstream classrooms.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases occur when an inconsistency exists between the participant's views and the guiding questions of the research study. One discrepant case was encountered during the semistructured interview with a study participant. When asked to detail the professional development sessions attended during the school year regarding working with students with ID, the study participant was unable to answer this question. The study participant disclosed that a great deal of work had been missed during the school year due to being out on leave for a large portion of the school year. Based on the responses from the study participant, there was not a way to examine the impact of professional development upon the research question posed due to the lack of personal perspective that could not be shared.

Evidence of Quality

Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence of data interpretation of collected data in qualitative research (Polit & Beck, 2014). Trustworthiness is essential to research study since it is integral to establishing reliability and validity. I ensured trustworthiness by utilizing reflective journals to accurately capture participant's thoughts and feelings. During the semistructured interviews, data were collected using a reflective

journal to record vivid descriptions, words used repetitively, and highlighting actions. Recording words used repetitively helped identify coding categories. A reflective journal was used as an active listening strategy. Using reflective journals also helped establish credibility.

Credibility refers to the truth of the study (Connelly, 2016). To minimize and neutralize any potential bias on behalf of the researcher, several strategies were implemented. The strategies included the use of a reflective journal to help keep my focus directly on the words stated by the study participants. Results suggest the use of reflective journals can effectively capture descriptions and explanations of individual experiences as they adapt to new organizational roles and settings (Lutz & Paretti, 2019). Another strategy used was member checking. The member checking process used could more appropriately be referred to as transcript review. Transcript review is a way for researchers to thoroughly analyze and understand data collected. Since the data collection used in this study involved recorded and transcribed data, it was necessary for study participants to review their transcribed interviews for accuracy and to ensure that their perspectives were adequately reflected. Member checking, also called *respondent validation*, refers to the practice of checking back with study respondents to see if the research is in line with their views (Busetto et al., 2020). Member checking also helped minimize the possibility of personal bias and beliefs influencing data interpretation.

Using semistructured interviews allowed me the opportunity to collect rich, detailed data regarding the phenomenon integral to this study. The rich detailed descriptions allowed participants to relate the phenomenon to other settings that they

encountered. The ability for a study participant to identify similarities between his or her own community and the current phenomenon is referred to as transferability (Lodico et al., 2010). During my study, the possibility of transferability was demonstrated by my ability to take the rich details of the study conducted and to identify their applicability to other settings. Information gained from the study could be used in other settings as a catalyst for further research.

To increase dependability of this study, a detailed account of the steps taken to collect data was defined. Furthermore, a detailed account of the steps taken during the data analysis process was outlined as well. Detailing the steps of both the data collection and data analysis process helped increase the dependability of the study. Dependability can be achieved by including audit trails and logs (Simon & Goes, 2016). Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device that helped increase the dependability of the study.

To obtain consistent results, I used Dedoose, a data analysis software program, to identify codes and themes. The use of the software program called Dedoose helped establish confirmability. Confirmability is the degree that results can be repeated and consistent (Connelly, 2016). Along with the use of reflective journals, reflexivity was established by periodic consideration and reflection on the beliefs of everyone who participated in the study. The use of the reflective journal allowed me to repeatedly reflect on my own perceptions and experiences as well as the perceptions and experiences of the study participants. Reflexivity refers to intrareliability or interreliability (Simon & Goes, 2016). Confirmability and reflexivity are interrelated.

Two strategies were used to decrease the occurrence of researcher bias. The first strategy involved the use of a reflective journal. The process of notating in a reflective journal was used during the data collection process as well as during data analysis. The reflective journal allowed me to notate my own personal perspectives and helped me separate my personal perspectives from the responses obtained from study participants.

Member checking was another strategy used to decrease the possibility of personal bias. To help verify the accuracy of participant responses, interviewees were sent copies of the printed transcripts after the audio recordings were converted to text documents. Participants were asked to examine the converted text documents to identify any discrepancies from the recorded interviews to the converted text documents. Participants were able to notify me immediately via email if any inaccuracies were discovered.

Description of the Project

To assist with the concern that too many students with ID are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms, a 3-day (8 hours per day) professional development training was developed and called the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is a 3-day (8 hours per day) professional development training for teachers. I designed Day 1 of the 3-day professional development project for teachers to be provided with knowledge and strategies geared toward increasing their comfort level when working with students with ID. Day 2 of the 3-day professional development project is intended to provide teachers with foundational

strategies designed for all middle school general education teachers. Day 3 of the professional development training includes direct embedded professional development inside mainstream classrooms containing students with ID. The goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is to help increase the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms.

Section 3: The Project

In Section 3, I provide a detailed description of the proposed 3-day (8 hours per day) professional development training referred to as the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was created to address the concern that too many students with ID are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general education classrooms. The goal of the 3-day professional training was to help teachers move away from placing students with ID mostly in separate classrooms due to disability stigmas, inexperience, and limited knowledge.

The goal of the multiday professional development training was to increase participation opportunities for students with ID in mainstream classrooms. Also, in Section 3, I describe the literature search strategy that included locating research articles that were peer-reviewed and published within the last 5 years and that could detail previous research relevant to my research findings, conceptual framework, as well as my research project. During the data analysis process, three themes emerged: (a) barriers to mainstream classrooms, (b) socialization, and (c) specialized classrooms. The themes reflect the shared perceptions expressed by the 10 middle school teachers regarding mainstream versus separate classroom placement for students with ID. I also considered the themes in relation to the conceptual framework by Festinger (1954) regarding shared norms or attitudes, consensus of opinions, and social comparison.

Project Goals

My goal with the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was to help teachers move away from placing students with ID mostly in separate classrooms due to disability stigmas, inexperience, and limited knowledge with a 50% improvement rate. Study participant data indicated that many teachers do not feel comfortable working with students with ID due to a lack of experience and preparation. Overwhelmingly, responses from study participants indicated the need for professional development regarding working with students with ID. Another goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was to provide embedded professional development inside of 100% of mainstream classrooms with students with ID in them. Study participant data responses showed that in absence of direct experience, study participants' perceived knowledge of students with ID was derived from social interactions and group uniformity versus individual knowledge. Lastly, another goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was to help connect specialized classroom teachers with mainstream teachers in order to provide support through strengthening the collaboration between general and special education teacher populations.

Rationale

Gaggioli and Sannipoli (2021) suggested that the years of experience in the classroom without contact with pupils with ID can even lead, with time, to consolidate teachers' negative attitudes. The collection of negative attitudes toward students with ID can be a root cause for too many students with ID being placed into separate classrooms instead of mainstream classrooms. The findings of this study indicated a need for a 3-day

(8 hours per day) professional development training program for general education teachers with the goal of decreasing the amount of students with ID being placed into separate classrooms due to disability stigmas, inexperience, and limited knowledge; providing embedded instructional support in mainstream classrooms; and facilitating support from specialized classroom teachers to mainstream teachers in an effort to reduce negative attitudes and leading to an increase in the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms.

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* would be a 3-day professional development project geared for middle school teachers. During the professional development training sessions, general education teachers would work together with special education staff members to build a collective system of support. According to O'Connor (2022), a multidimensional framework was needed to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classroom settings. The design of the 3-day professional development training is consistent with the themes identified during the data analysis process.

The 3-day professional development would provide essential guidance needed to support students with ID. The first day of the professional development was designed to support teachers who work with students with ID. This professional development session is for both general and special education teachers. During this session, teachers are provided with knowledge and strategies designed to increase their comfort level when working with students with ID. During the study, many participants stated that they had very little information regarding students with ID. Therefore, a 3-day professional

development-based support plan was created to help promote understanding regarding students with ID.

Day 2 of the 3-day professional development training for teachers includes assistance with foundational skills and knowledge needed for general education teachers when working with students with ID in mainstream classes. Regarding education for pupils within mainstream schools with ID, studies showed that teachers express concerns about providing adaptations for pupils, especially regarding coping with challenging behavior, and teachers expressed a lack of professional competence in meeting pupils' needs (Klang et al., 2020). Day 2 of the professional development training focuses on providing general education teachers with knowledge and skills regarding instructional strategies and curricular modifications that could be used with students with ID.

Day 3 of the professional development training includes support from specialized classroom teachers to general education teachers. Special education staff members spend a full day in the general education classrooms providing direct, on-demand coaching, assistance, and providing feedback to general education teachers. Coaching or professional development for teachers requires observing teachers' instructional strategies in classrooms, providing informative feedback, and guiding the mastery of new skills (Gubbins & Hayden, 2021). The 3-day professional development training was designed to increase the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. My literature search strategy included locating research articles that were peer-reviewed and published within the last 5 years that could detail previous research relevant to my research findings, conceptual framework, as well as my research project. Most of the articles were located using Google Scholar in conjunction with the Walden Library, which helped widen my search. The predominant databases used to conduct my research were ERIC and Education Source. Using Google Scholar allowed me to have access to any additional reference material associated with an article such as conference proceedings, books, and citations. Search terms included *teachers and stigmas*, *placement process and decisions*, *socialization*, *specialized classroom*, and *professional development*. Three recommendations emerged from my research findings to support the research question: (a) the need for training for teachers who work with students with ID to help teachers move away from placing students with ID mostly in separate classrooms due to disability stigmas, inexperience, and limited knowledge; (b) a need to expand the belief that students with ID only gain social skills when participating in mainstream classrooms; and (c) the need to shift away from the belief that specialized classrooms are the best option for students with ID.

A professional development project was an appropriate genre to address the problem that this study explored that too many students with ID are placed into separate classrooms at the middle school level rather than being mainstreamed into general

education classrooms. The design of the 3-day professional development training is consistent with the themes identified during the data analysis process. The themes reflected the shared perceptions expressed by the 10 middle school teachers regarding mainstream versus separate classroom placement for students with ID. I also considered the themes in relation to the conceptual framework by Festinger (1954) regarding shared norms or attitudes, consensus of opinions, and social comparison. The findings served as the foundation for a professional development training program for both special education and general education teachers designed to help increase the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms as a way to address the problem explored during this project study.

Professional Development

Professional development for teachers is crucial for ensuring that educators have the skills and knowledge they need to provide high-quality instruction and support to their students (Desimone, 2023). However, the best ways to deliver professional development are highly debatable as are critiques of current approaches and evidence of overall effectiveness. Whether to provide professional development in a direct instruction manner versus a learner-centered or participative approach is also a consideration that must be determined. Direct instruction involves providing teachers with explicit instruction and modeling new skills or strategies (Cronje, 2020). However, a learner-centered approach emphasizes the active participation of teachers in their own learning and the use of collaborative and problem-solving activities (Cronje, 2020). While both approaches have their strengths, research suggests that learner-centered and participative

approaches are more effective at promoting long-term changes in teaching practices and improving student outcomes.

Another approach to professional development is based on the principles of constructivism and emphasizes the importance of active and experiential learning (Brau, 2020). Based on this approach, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and construct new knowledge through problem-solving and inquiry-based activities (Kummen & Hodgins, 2019). While this approach has been criticized for being too time consuming and difficult to implement, evidence suggests that it can be effective at promoting changes in teacher practice and improving student outcomes (Kummen & Hodgins, 2019).

Andragogy, or adult learning theory, is another important consideration in professional development. This theory suggests that adults learn best when they are self-directed and have the opportunity to apply new knowledge in practical ways and are provided with relevant and meaningful content (Ovesni & Radović, 2021). Professional development programs that are based on andragogical principles are more likely to be effective and sustainable, as they are tailored to the needs and interests of individual teachers and provide opportunities for active engagement and application of new knowledge (Cioè-Peña, 2019).

Despite the importance of professional development, there are several pitfalls and shortcomings to current approaches. One common criticism is that professional development is often disconnected from teachers' day-to-day work and does not address their specific needs or challenges (Vera et al., 2022). Another criticism is that

professional development is often one-time or short-term events that do not provide sufficient support or follow-up for teachers to implement new strategies or skills (Vera et al., 2022).

Despite these criticisms, there is evidence to suggest that high-quality professional development can have a significant impact on teacher practice and student outcomes (Kim et al., 2019). Research also shows that professional development that is sustained over time, job-embedded, and focused on specific student needs can lead to improvements in student achievement and teacher practice (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Professional development for teachers is essential for ensuring that educators have the skills and knowledge they need to provide high-quality instruction and support to their students (Desimone, 2023). While there are debates and critiques around the best approaches to professional development, evidence suggests that learner-centered and participative approaches, constructivist principles, and andragogical principles can be very effective at promoting changes in teacher practice and improving student outcomes (St. Clair, 2023). In summary, this paragraph emphasizes the importance of high-quality professional development for teachers and its effects on teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Despite objections, there is evidence that supports the claim that thoughtfully planned professional growth can result in significant advancements. According to research, persistent, job-integrated, and student-focused professional development can improve teacher effectiveness and student accomplishment. The paragraph underlines how crucial professional development is in giving teachers the abilities and information they need to provide students with outstanding instruction and

support. The most effective methods for professional development are still being debated, but research indicates that learner-centered, participatory, constructivist, and andragogical principles are very effective at encouraging positive changes in teachers' practices and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Based on a review of the literature, professional development for general education teachers and special education teachers is in high demand. An abundance of literature suggests a need for professional development for both general education and special education who work with students with disabilities. Woodcock and Hardy (2017) indicated a need for training for teachers who work with students with severe cognitive disabilities. Metsala and Harkins (2020) examined the "concerns, opinions, and feelings of teachers on the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in regular education classes" (p. 179). Jyothi (2021) found teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, in its simplest definition, refer to the viewpoints or dispositions of teachers toward the particular object of inclusive education.

Historically, teachers, more general educators than special educators, have voiced a need for more professional development for working with students with disabilities (Nagro et al., 2023). Providing professional development to teachers regarding students with disabilities can lead to increased academic performance for students with disabilities. In order to enhance instructors' practices and the outcomes for children with disabilities in their classrooms, professional development is a systematic and useful learning activity (Fidan & Tekin-Iftar, 2022). Hills and Sessoms-Penny (2021) added that general educators' hands-on with special education students is becoming the norm

leaving them with the need to adapt without solutions because inclusion predates their undergraduate training. As Hills and Sessoms-Penny (2021) noted, “Based on the analysis of the data, a major constant was that professional development for pre-service teachers lacks specificity for inclusion because of the all-encompassing nature of their students’ characteristics” (p. 1).

Al-Subaiei (2017) stated, “Skills for educators in inclusive classroom environments are critical and professional development is vital for effectiveness” (p. 3). Inexperience and unpreparedness can lead to general education teachers being unwilling to include students with ID in their classrooms. On the one hand, instructors who receive more training to work with children who fall into particular disability categories, such as ID, feel more equipped to put these students’ needs into practice (Morningstar & Kurth, 2017). The problem of being unprepared then turns into negative perceptions toward individuals with ID (Garcia, 2021). Al-Subaiei (2017) highlights the crucial significance of skills and professional development for teachers in inclusive classroom settings in this line. Teachers of general education who lack expertise and preparation may be hesitant to accept students with intellectual impairments (ID) into their classes. However, instructors who obtain specialized training for working with students in particular disability categories, like ID, frequently feel more comfortable attending to the requirements of these students. Garcia (2021) stated that lack of readiness can result in unfavorable impressions of people with ID. The paragraph emphasizes the need of professional development in promoting inclusivity and combating discriminatory behaviors toward students with ID in traditional classrooms.

The choice of a 3-day professional development training based on the themes identified during the data analysis process is justified due to the fact that providing an *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program for both special education and general education teachers who work with students with ID is necessary for several reasons. Inclusion training can help teachers develop a better understanding of the unique needs and abilities of students with ID that can lead to a reduction of stereotypes, stigmas, and biases that may exist and allow teachers to approach students with ID with empathy and understanding (Miller, 2023). The professional development training program can equip teachers with strategies and techniques that can be used to support the learning and socialization of students with ID in mainstream classrooms (Nagro et al., 2023). The professional development training can help teachers learn instructional methods and positive behavioral supports needed to help students with ID access the curriculum and participate in class. The professional development training can help ensure equitable access for students with ID into mainstream classrooms.

The better and more positive information teachers receive about disabilities and ID, the less negative attitudes and beliefs will be registered (Gallego-Ortega & Rodríguez-Fuentes, 2021). Research supports that a lack of professional development is a barrier to inclusion of students with ID into general education classrooms (Juvonen et al., 2019). The education of teachers is the foundation for the continuum of growth and direction in student populations because the greater the experience of the teacher, the deeper the learning is for the student (Hills & Sessoms-Penny, 2021). To help teachers

overcome negative perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with ID into mainstream classrooms, professional development and ongoing support is essential.

Teachers in inclusive classrooms instruct learners with mixed abilities without detailed information about how to teach to all the students' educational inclinations (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). In a supported environment, general education teachers would be able to ask questions and receive real-time support. However, when listening to teachers, the intrapersonal domain with its focus on motivation and metacognition stands out as essential for building teacher capacity, reminding all professional development providers that motivation and reflection is equally important for teacher learning as it is for student learning (Haug & Mork, 2021).

Along with providing opportunities for teachers to reflect and engage in discourse, it is imperative to explore specific strategies and tools for fostering an inclusive and responsive educational environment that gives voice to all students and promotes equitable access and opportunities (Samuels, 2018). The definition of collaborative professional development is based on Zeng and Day's (2019) definition as "shared, sustained learning involving two or more teachers" (p. 379).

Teachers and Stigmas

Disability labels and social stigmas have existed within school systems for many years. Public perceptions frequently mirror the prejudices and myths that make up dominant narratives on disability because there is not a healthy public dialogue about disabilities and there are not many opportunities for interaction in mixed-ability groups (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). For many years, teachers have defaulted to preconceived

notions and viewpoints of others in the absence of direct experience and knowledge regarding working with students with ID (Kleinert, 2020). The term ID connotes stigma. The term ID over the years has been equated with low positioning and mental incapability (Simplican, 2019). Because of this, it may be said that language has a significant impact on how individuals think. People with ID are frequently defined by their handicap (O'Byrne & Muldoon, 2017). Stigmas held by teachers can impact their actions regarding students with ID. Both disability labels and social stigmas have complicated and negatively impacted the process of including students with ID in mainstream classrooms. Nussbaum and Steinborn (2019) noted that teacher preparation programs do not adequately engage issues of identity or disability history to prepare teachers to address these issues with their students. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding disabilities can have a direct impact on inclusion practices. When it comes to promoting inclusive processes, teachers' attitudes are viewed as one of the most important and foretelling aspects affecting inclusion (Gallego-Ortega & Rodríguez-Fuentes, 2021). Teachers' attitudes and belief systems regarding inclusion can create a barrier to access to inclusive classrooms. The successful school inclusion process is greatly influenced by teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities (Ginevra et al., 2022). In order to increase inclusion opportunities for students with ID, many efforts have been made to reduce the stigma surrounding ID among educators. There are some encouraging results about contact interventions and education strategies to lower unfavorable attitudes regarding students with disabilities (Smythe et al., 2020). With

public discourse, education, and training, interventions can be implemented aimed at decreasing social stigmas that exist among educators regarding students with ID.

Placement Process and Decisions

Historically, a lack of knowledge and experience with students with disabilities can lead to increased placement in separate classrooms. Teacher bias and lack of preparation can serve as additional barriers to inclusive classroom placements for students with the most significant disabilities (Agran et al., 2020). According to the data discussed above, placement decisions are typically influenced by factors unrelated to a student's specific requirements and are rarely compatible with what is known about the advantages of inclusion (Agran et al., 2020).

General education teachers are held to understanding the legal reinfections that standard of IDEA laws and should feel confident in providing the education support needed in the general education classroom (McBeth, 2021). The common notion expressed by general education study respondents was the feeling of being a spectator instead of a participant during student placement meetings. General education teachers described sitting in silence and signing in agreement to terms and concepts that they were either completely unfamiliar with or had very little experience with; however, they were expected to follow the terms outlined in the IEPs.

A lack of knowledge or experience can impact placement decisions made regarding students with ID. Unless teachers have professional knowledge and skills related to inclusion, negative attitudes toward inclusive students can be seen in teachers (Deniz & Ilik, 2021). When teachers do not have their own knowledge, there is a

tendency to buy into commonly held beliefs and preconceived notions. The most obvious of these are types of disability and severity of impairment (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

A lack of knowledge can lead to inaccurate characterizations of students with cognitive disabilities. We must view disadvantaging elements through an intersectional lens that purposefully blurs and combines the classifications that have traditionally been used to define people because they cluster together, interrelate, and categorize each other (Thomas & Loxley, 2022).

Preconceived belief systems can impede access to general education classrooms for students with ID and has historically. Scores from intelligence tests influence perceptions and beliefs about student capacity and, thus, influence placement (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The practice of placing the primary focus on disability has contributed to too many students with ID being placed into separate classrooms. In the words of Agran et al. (2020), this leads to an historically common district-level placement policy in districts in which all students with a particular disability label are placed together in a classroom or school, to be served by professionals with a particular educational background.

Socialization

Based on a review of the literature, students with ID experience difficulties interacting socially with others. Impairment in social skills functioning is the defining feature among individuals with ID (Jacob et al., 2022). According to a review of the literature, many teachers believe that the primary benefit that students with disabilities receive from participation in mainstream classrooms is socialization. For a child with disabilities' socialization is also seen as the process and outcome of mastering the

knowledge and abilities of social life (Borisova, 2019). Many educators believe that even though the benefits of academic success may be low for students with ID, then socialization benefits gained far outweigh the academics. Therefore, the predominance of uniform, standardized teaching techniques and materials and the lack of direct integration of socializing effect in the educational process pose substantial obstacles to the development of inclusive education and improving its quality (Derzhavina et al., 2021). According to the research, social skills development must take place in inclusive settings for students with ID. In addition to a certain degree of labor adaptation, socialization also entails learning to navigate in the environment while abiding by predetermined rules and standards of behavior (Kozina et al., 2019). According to the research, a primary focus of including students with ID into mainstream classrooms was to help develop social skills needed to build relationships with others and develop functional skills needed to navigate independently in society. Research indicates a need to move away from a medical understanding of ID and focus more on a social understanding of ID. Social inclusion is intentionally including students with ID into inclusive classrooms in order to help prepare students for society but also to help improve attitudes regarding students with ID by students, parents, and teachers (Mironova et al., 2019). According to the literature, deliberate efforts focused on the adoption and application of social skills must occur in order for the successful inclusion of kids with ID into mainstream classes to occur: “Using the indicated intervention technique, a number of features, including communication, bridging the gap in social skills deficits, emotional detection and regulation, and adaptive behavior were fostered” (Jacob et al., 2022, p. 11). The literature

indicated that social skills should be a priority in order to foster social competence among students with ID. The ability of pupils to form and sustain positive interpersonal interactions, win the acceptance of their peers, forge and keep friendships, and discontinue harmful or pernicious interpersonal ties is referred to as social competence (Øzerk et al., 2021). According to the literature, social skills can benefit not only students with ID but also their nondisabled peers.

Specialized Classrooms

In an effort to move away from separate schools for students with ID, specialized classrooms were added to school campuses as a classroom placement option for students with disabilities. According to studies, there were glaring gaps in the presence of children with disabilities in classrooms (Slee, 2018). After passage of IDEA, public schools were required to educate all students and the demand for special educators increased immensely (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Teachers who taught in specialized classrooms were taught specially designed instructional strategies in preparation to work with the students who would occupy the classrooms. The teachers became known as special education teachers. Special education teachers receive formalized training and specific teacher certification that confirm their ability to address the special needs of students with disabilities. Based on a review of the literature, specialized classrooms were designed to provide additional personnel, instructional and curricular accommodations, behavior management, social skills, and transition activities needed for students with ID. Special education refers to a variety of instructional strategies that are implemented by qualified special education teachers and are not typically seen or used by untrained teachers in a

regular classroom because they are specifically created to meet the needs of students with disabilities who have special learning needs (Francisco et al., 2020). The intent of specialized classrooms was to provide inclusion within a school campus for students with disabilities. Due to the fact that specialized classrooms are designed to support the needs of students with disabilities, there is a tendency to consider specialized classrooms as the most appropriate placement for students with disabilities. The point being made here is that a lot of people still hold onto antiquated ideas about those with disabilities and fail to recognize their capabilities (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020).

As discriminatory practices are renamed “inclusion” in the context of inclusive education, with no further modification, and terminology like “special education,” “integration,” and “inclusive education” are used concurrently or interchangeably (Cologon, 2022). However, despite the fact that the majority of jurisdictions support the rights-based anti-discrimination principle of inclusive education, they still rely on special needs practices (such as the identification and assessment of individual need, IEPs, and specialist forms of provision facilities for some learners (Florian, 2019). Based on a review of the literature, while the intent of special education classrooms was viewed as a solution, they evolved into a form of exclusion for students with disabilities. In some regards, special education classrooms became the opposite of inclusion. According to the literature, there is still a disconnect between how inclusion is theoretically understood and how it is actually implemented in school settings (Reeves et al., 2022).

Project Description

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will be provided by members of the district special education department (see Appendix A). The oversight for the training program will be provided by the special education coordinator over the life skills program. The goal of the 3-day professional development training is to help increase the number of students with ID participating in general education classes by providing professional development for supporting students with ID in mainstream classrooms and included IEP paperwork support, instructional and curricular modifications, placement-process training, and behavior support. The 3-day professional development training also is intended to provide essential guidance needed during the placement process for students with ID.

The first day of the professional development training is designed for teachers who work with students with ID. This professional development session is designed for both general and special education teachers. During this session, teachers will be provided with knowledge and strategies to increase their comfort level when working with students with ID. During the study, many participants stated that they had very little information regarding students with ID. Based on the research, lack of experience and training was a barrier that hindered more students with ID accessing general education classrooms.

Day 2 of the 3-day professional development training for teachers will include assistance with foundational skills and knowledge needed for general education teachers when working with students with ID in mainstream classes. Regarding education for

pupils within mainstream schools with ID, study findings have shown that teachers expressed concerns about providing adaptations for pupils, especially regarding coping with challenging behavior, and teachers expressed a lack of professional competence in meeting pupils' needs (Klang et al., 2020).

Day 3 of the professional development training will include knowledge and strategies presented by special education teachers to general education teachers. During this professional development session, special education teachers will share instructional and curricular strategies, knowledge regarding visual support, and behavior management tips with general education teachers. The 3-day professional development training has been designed in an effort to increase the number of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms.

Needed Resources and Existing Supports

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will be offered during the summer, specifically prior to the start of the academic year during the summer break. By providing the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program during the summer, I will be able to offer a monetary stipend for participation. This will serve as a great attendance motivator. Support will be needed from the department of special education and district campus administrators. District campus administrators will need to help ensure that their general education teachers are aware of the professional development training program and understand that they are able to participate in the program. The professional development training will take place over 3 days (8-hour days) during the summer.

Resources needed for the training sessions include a projector, sound system, projection screen, Wi-Fi, microphone, copies of PowerPoint presentations, pens, post-it notes, sample IEP paperwork, and laptops. Participants will receive a binder that contains copies of all presented materials, blank note pages, and a list of telephone numbers to call for support. Participants will sit in small groups of six that support collaborative and experiential activities, opportunities to both design and implement instruction in the field while receiving feedback and reflecting on their instruction and student learning (see Hughes et al., 2021). The teachers will receive specific scenarios to work together as a team to practice new skills gained such as lesson modifications and behavior management. The training room will accommodate a total of 75 teachers. Although a monetary stipend will be provided to teachers, support from the special education budget officer will be needed.

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will be presented by the department of special education. The presenters will include both special education staff members, especially the special education program coordinator for the Life Skills program. Other staff members who will assist with presentations will include special education teachers who have provided instruction for students with ID on a full-time basis. Presenters will also include general education teachers who have successfully included students with ID into their classrooms.

Participants will be able to earn continuing education units that fulfill continuing education professional development hours, and they will also receive a certificate upon completion of the training program. All participants will receive follow-up support in the

form of telephone calls, classroom visits, and emails to ensure that they have been able to successfully include students with ID into their general education classrooms. From the onset of the training program as well as throughout the training program, the special education coordinator over the Life Skills program will communicate to participants that the goal of the training program is to increase the number of students with ID in general education classrooms.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers

Potential Barriers

The main barrier that would affect the professional development training is low interest from general education teachers. General education teachers may not want to increase the number of students with ID in their classrooms. For this reason, support from district campus administrators will be vital. Another barrier to the training program may include resistance from general education teachers to learn new strategies for working with students with ID. General education teachers may believe that too much preparation and work is required in order to include students with ID into their classrooms. If teachers are not receptive to new knowledge, they could easily revert back to previous practices and beliefs that serve as barriers for students with ID to access general education classes.

Potential Solutions to Barriers

To address the main barrier that would affect professional development training, low interest from general education teachers, a campaign to gain interest will be initiated. Prior to the end of the school year, middle school general education teachers will receive a flyer containing details regarding the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*.

The flyer will provide the date for the training program, the objective, and the amount of the monetary stipend offered for attendance. The flyer will also contain contact information for the professional development team so that the target participants may make inquiries regarding any questions about the training sessions. This will allow teachers the opportunity to obtain knowledge of the training program prior to leaving for summer break in addition to giving target participants the opportunity to plan around the professional development training session dates. To address the barrier of low interest from general education teachers, a partnership will also form with district campus administrators. Campus administrators will also have the opportunity to recruit teachers to participate in the professional development training session. Campus administrators will be provided with a list of teachers who will need to participate in the training sessions from the Department of Special Education.

Project Implementation and Timetable

To launch the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* successfully, proper planning must occur and include a detailed professional development training, communication plan, and an ongoing support plan. Support will be needed from the department of special education services and campus administrators. The 3-day *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will occur prior to the start of the academic year during the summer break. Holding the training sessions over the summer will provide teachers with additional time prior to the start of the new school year to implement changes in their current classroom and to properly prepare for participation in placement ARDC meetings for students with ID. This professional development proposal will be

reviewed by the special education department in consultation with the regional services center for the state for approval in advance. The goal of the professional development training program is designed to help equip general education teachers with training, support, and resources regarding the inclusion of students with ID into general education classrooms. Another goal of the professional development training is to help prepare general education teachers who participate in placement meetings for students with ID to make informed decisions for students with ID regarding inclusive or mainstream options. The professional development training session is designed to help general education teachers understand their role regarding placement practices for students with ID in general education classrooms. The expected outcome of the professional development training program is to inform general and special educators regarding the needs of students with ID such that changes in teacher behaviors occur regarding placement decisions for this population of students thereby resulting in an increase of students with ID participating in general education classrooms.

An essential component of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is the ongoing support. All participants will be provided with a contact teacher who will serve as their mentor and support system throughout the school year. The ongoing support mentors will provide a progress report to the special education coordinator monthly. The report will contain information regarding any difficulties that the general education teachers face as they provide support to students with ID in their classrooms. From the monthly reports received from the support teachers, the special education coordinator will respond by providing additional strategies and support as needed. The

collected information from the monthly reports will help ensure the effectiveness of the training program and help monitor the necessary technical assistance for the target participants.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Researcher and Others

My role as the researcher was to present outcomes of this qualitative project study to the director of special education to help change special education policy within the district as well as provide recommendations regarding placement practices for students with ID at the middle school level for the special education director to consider. Additionally, it was my role as the researcher to present a detailed professional development training program to the school district and the special education director that identified a target audience, needed support and resources, as well as measuring program effectiveness. The role of the special education department was to provide stipends for participants and to prepare for and hold the training session during the summer semester. The Department of Special Education also provided the training presenters. The role of the special education department consisted of working collaboratively with campus administrators to remove any identified barriers to general education teachers participating in the training session. The special education department also was instrumental in collecting real-time feedback through the use of ongoing support to teachers in order to measure program effectiveness and to provide any additional support identified.

Project Evaluation Plan

The goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* plan will help teachers move away from placing students with ID mostly in separate classrooms due to disability stigmas, inexperience, and limited knowledge. Study participant data indicated that many teachers do not feel comfortable working with students with ID due to a lack of experience and preparation. Overwhelming responses from study participants indicated the need for professional development regarding working with students with ID. Another goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is to provide embedded professional development inside mainstream classrooms containing students with ID. Participant responses showed that in absence of direct experience, study participants perceived knowledge of students with ID was derived from social interactions and group uniformity versus individual knowledge. Lastly, another goal of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is to help connect specialized classroom teachers with mainstream teachers in order to provide support.

Justification for Evaluation

The evaluation method for this project will include both outcomes based and formative based measures. With outcome-based evaluation, the focus will remain on the evaluation of outcomes of the program by stating the knowledge, skill, and behavior a graduate was predicted to realize upon completion of a program (see Japee & Oza, 2021). In order to collect immediate feedback, the evaluation method for the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will include a formative assessment. Formative

assessment is not an add-on activity but rather needed to be an integrated element of instruction (Schildkamp et al., 2020).

Overall Goals of the Project

The measure of success for the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* and overall goal of the training program is to inform teachers regarding the nature and needs of students with ID such that teachers' knowledge and skills are strengthened regarding the needs for students with ID in mainstream settings, thereby resulting in an increase in the number of students with ID participating in general education classrooms. Additional measures of success will include increasing the foundational knowledge of general education teachers at the middle school level regarding supporting students with ID in their classrooms along with increasing knowledge of placement practices for students with ID during ARDC meetings.

To help gauge program success, feedback will be obtained from general education teachers throughout the training program. After the training session, teachers will be assigned a special education teacher for support throughout the school year. Feedback will be collected from general education teachers monthly. The feedback will be sent to the special education coordinator over the Life Skills program. The special education coordinator will also share feedback from general education teachers with the director of special education.

After the completion of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*, an evaluation form will be provided to all participants. All the collected evaluation forms will be carefully reviewed by the special education coordinator. All information collected

from the evaluations will be reviewed and considered for program enhancement.

Evaluation forms will be used in order to obtain immediate feedback from participants.

The evaluation forms will be coupled with collected monthly reports and may result in future or revised professional development. Any collected feedback that may affect a school campus will be shared with campus administrators.

Key Stakeholders

The key stakeholders will include the special education coordinator, general education teachers, special education teachers, special education leadership staff, and campus administrators. The special education department leadership will collaborate with the campus stakeholders to strengthen the network of collaborative support for students with ID in accessing more inclusive placement options for services at the middle school in the study district. Stakeholders will benefit from the professional development 3-day project and will receive ongoing technical support from assigned special education support personnel in order to monitor and adjust the effective implementation of the knowledge received and skills that will be developed in this 3-day professional development project.

Project Implications

Local Community

Once the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* is fully implemented, it will be offered annually and supported throughout the school year. Feedback obtained from the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will also help inform placement practices for students with ID resulting in increased participation in general education

classrooms on a continuous basis. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program will have several implications for the local community.

A project implication for the local community could be that middle school general education teachers will be provided with foundational skills as well as strategies for working with students with ID in a variety of ways: (a) instructional and curricular modifications, (b) behavior support, and (c) placement practices. Another possible project implication for the local community is that positive social change could result individually, for families, organizationally, and societal/policy wise.

Broader Implications

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program could result in positive social change for students with ID by increasing access to general education classrooms. By spending time in mainstream classrooms, students with ID could potentially increase their academic performance, build friendships, and gain exposure to the general education curriculum. A project implication for the local community could also include positive social change for families. Historically, families specifically, parents of students with ID, have led the fight for the opportunity for their children to participate in general education classrooms alongside of their nondisabled peers. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program could help ensure that students with ID have access to mainstream classrooms within the district. Another possibility for positive social change that could result from the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program is organizational change. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* program could result in organizational change regarding supporting not only students but

also, teachers in order to promote effective inclusion of students with ID in mainstream classrooms. The training program could represent the district's commitment to inclusive practices. Another possible implication of the *Inclusion Professional Development* is positive social change to local special education policy within the district. Special education policies regarding inclusion and placement practices for students with ID could result. The positive social change that could result in the local district could be generalized to a global level. The local special education policy changes could be replicated by school districts around the world.

Summary

In Section 3, I detailed the 3-day (8 hours per day) professional development training that was designed based on the findings of the project study and geared toward increasing the number of students with ID participating in general education classrooms as well as to help middle school general education teachers understand more in depth the placement process and practices for students with ID during ARDC meetings. A literature review was presented that was based on the study findings, project study, and conceptual framework. Section 3 also included information regarding the potential resources and supports, project description, potential barriers and resolutions, local community implications, professional development evaluation, and a broader review of the project implications to students with ID. At the conclusion of Section 3, implications for positive social change were discussed along with implications for the local school district. The outcomes of the professional development training could help change local special education policy within the district as well as provide recommendations for change for

other school districts across the world. In Section 4, project reflections and conclusions are presented as well as my reflections as a practitioner.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions regarding separate classroom placement practices for students with ID. As a result of the outcomes from the project study, a 3-day (8 hours each day) professional development training was designed and developed. The 3-day professional development training was designed to address the concerns raised by study participants. Although there are many students with severe disabilities participating in general education classes, general educators are rarely given adequate training and direction on how to assist these kids' academic and social involvement (Kuntz & Carter, 2021). The first day of the professional development training is designed for teachers who work with students with ID. Day 2 of the professional development training focuses on providing general education teachers with knowledge and skills regarding instructional strategies and curricular modifications that could be used with students with ID. Day 3 of the professional development includes support from specialized classroom teachers to general education teachers.

The professional development training was designed because findings from my study reflected that many general education teachers lacked the basic foundational skills needed when working with students with ID (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Many general education teachers have little-to-no prior experience working with students with ID (Agran et al., 2020). The professional development training was designed to increase knowledge and skills and the comfort level of general education teachers when working with students with low incidence disabilities.

The professional development training was also designed so that general education teachers receive ongoing continued support from specialized personnel. This will be accomplished by embedding professional development into the general education classrooms, thereby allowing teachers to receive modeling and have the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers immediately from specialized personnel. The professional development training was developed to increase knowledge regarding the placement process for students with ID. The professional development training was also developed to address the fear, hesitancy, myths, outdated stigmas that exist and act as barriers to students with ID participating in general education classrooms. The effectiveness of the professional development training will depend on the implementation of the plan and the commitment of the special education department to continue the training program on an annual basis. In the next section, I discuss the strengths and limitations of my project. I also discuss recommendations for alternative approaches that could be considered. Additionally, I review my personal growth experienced throughout this research journey.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

A strength of my project is the close alignment of the responses from the study participants to the development of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*. Given that teachers' perceptions can dramatically affect the successful integration of students with disabilities, it was important to understand these viewpoints to determine how to best support teachers in creating a beneficial learning environment for their

students (Bolourian et al., 2021). A strength of the professional development training was the ongoing support that general education teachers will receive throughout the school year. This will allow for the opportunity to address new concerns as they arise.

Another strength of my project is the potential to impact not only the local district but other school districts around the nation. The success of the 3-day professional development training could help lead to increased opportunities for participation in general education classrooms for students with ID nationwide. The greatest strength of this project is the possibility of increasing the educational opportunities for students with ID.

Limitations

One limitation of the project is the limited involvement of campus administrators. The exclusion of campus administrators during the professional development training program may represent a lost opportunity to gain support and reinforcement for general education teachers. By involving campus administrators in the professional development training program, teachers could receive confirmation that resources and support would be available to them in order to support students with ID in their classrooms. Campus administrators could be instrumental in removing barriers for students with ID participating in general education classrooms.

Another limitation of the professional development training program is that only middle school teachers will be included. Including the elementary grade levels in the training program may have provided an opportunity to increase access for students with ID much earlier than middle school. Including the elementary grade level teachers in the

professional development training program could produce an opportunity for them to receive the support and foundational knowledge needed for working with students with ID.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative project instead of a professional development training program could be an evaluation report. An evaluation report based on the placement practices for students with ID would have also been an appropriate project to pursue. The goal of the evaluation report would remain an effort to increase the number of students with ID participating in general education classrooms. The evaluation report could include a review of the current placement options and procedures followed by students with ID. Another component of the evaluation report could be to review the effects of staff shortages in general education classrooms compared to special education classrooms.

Another alternative project could be the creation of a curriculum plan for general education teachers to use with students with ID in their classrooms. The curriculum plan could include the necessary resources in order to assist general education teachers with students' accommodation and curricular modifications. The curriculum plan could be written by special education teachers who have specialized knowledge regarding instructional strategies for students with disabilities. The curriculum plan could be updated annually.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Pursuing the journey required to explore the research question posed in my research study has resulted in increased scholarship skills. Research education

professionals are always learning, finding out things, analyzing information, adapting their behavior according to information received, looking to improve, and adapting to modern demands (Pramodini, 2022). I have always considered myself as a burgeoning scholar throughout my life. I was always drawn to textbooks and academic inquiry.

Exploring this research project has helped me refine and expand my definition of what it means to be an academic scholar. Research helps people understand any subject and its principals in a much better and easier way and will encounter new questions and search for answers to those questions that lead to learning new theories of any subject (Pramodini, 2022). During this process, I was able to begin with a given problem that impacts the educational world, define a path to further explore the problem, engage with other educators, and propose possible solutions to help improve the research problem pursued.

Pursuing this doctoral degree has been the greatest challenge of my life to date. This journey has helped me gain invaluable insight regarding critical thought and the process needed to pursue critical inquiry. This journey has increased my level of perseverance when taking on a task and continuing with it until completion. From this journey there are practices that have been incorporated into my life. I have learned the benefit of exploring current and past research when looking for solutions to academic inquiries encountered. I have learned the importance of collecting strong data by ensuring that credibility, conformability, flexibility, dependability, transferability, and trustworthiness are accounted for in the research study. After conducting a literature review, my knowledge regarding placement practices for students with ID was extended.

The journey has helped me identify ways that I can be instrumental in increasing opportunities for students with ID participating in general education classrooms.

Developing my research project has occurred over a lengthy period. Time was needed to fully explore every section of this research study. According to Senabre-Hidalgo (2018), uncertainty needs tight management to avoid failure, and creativity needs firm structures in order to be transformed into widely usable project outcomes. The research project required more time than I originally planned; however, the additional time was needed to fully explore the research topic and to engage in a critical journey that required questioning, critical thought, data disaggregation, hypotheses creation, and drawing conclusions. On many occasions it was necessary to explore the research components in a cyclical manner.

During this process, I learned that project development is carried out in stages that build upon each other until a conclusion is ascertained. Johnson (2018) noted that careful planning is a key to quality research. I was able to demonstrate the project development process when I designed the 3-day professional development training program that I referred to as the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* required that I take the findings from my project and develop a professional development training that aligned with study outcomes and provided resources, information, and support the effort to increase the opportunity for students with ID to participate in general education classrooms.

The goal of the research study pursued was to impact positive social change for students with ID through increased access to general education classrooms. In order to

accomplish this, it was necessary to understand what it means to be a change agent. This doctoral process has helped me develop my skills as an educational change agent.

According to Robbins et al. (2020), change is a common thread that must be passed as part of the life of every individual, group, and organization to grow, develop, and adapt to future conditions. I fully realize that throughout my career track, it may be necessary to pursue change as an educational leader. The doctoral journey has provided practice and increased knowledge regarding what being a change agent involves. My leadership skills and capacity have increased as a result of the doctoral journey.

During this project study, I pursued a research problem that has been in existence for many years with very little-to-no change. It takes determination and commitment to lead change under conditions like this. Knowing that the benefits of greater academic opportunities for students with ID could be the outcomes, I was determined as a leader to pursue this path. According to Cole et al. (2021), results indicated students who received math and language arts instruction in a general education classroom were more likely than students in more segregated settings to participate in a 2-year postsecondary education program.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

In my personal educational career, I have always strived to be a change agent. As a result of the doctoral journey, my desire to be a change agent has been enhanced, strengthened, and reinforced. This journey allowed me to engage in critical inquiry and thought to explore a research problem and to identify ways to bring improvement to the research problem resulting in social change for students with ID. This research project

allowed me the opportunity to practice the skill of engaging in a detailed study regarding a specific problem leading to the discovery of new information.

The doctoral journey has enhanced my skills as a scholar. I have been able to conduct in depth literature reviews that resulted in additional knowledge regarding the research problem pursued. I gained a great deal of knowledge from reading studies conducted by others across the world. The insight gained from reading the studies of others deepened my understanding of scholarly writing.

In my professional career, I will continue the practice of engaging in critical inquiry and scholarly writing. I plan to make sure that I continue to put critical inquiry into practice. Many years ago, I made a commitment to become an educational change agent, and I remain committed to this endeavor. Pursuing a doctoral degree has provided the opportunity to become a practitioner of critical inquiry, discourse, and collaboration. During the doctoral journey, I learned how to apply scholarly knowledge in a practical sense. I was able to take the knowledge gained from data collection and analysis and use it to design a multitiered system of support that could help bring improvement to the research problem studied. I have learned the importance of producing a very detailed plan designed to bring change to a current problem. This journey has strengthened my ability to pursue and conduct critical inquiry.

The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was the resulting project from the critical inquiry pursued. I was able to develop a project that was aligned to the needs expressed by study participants. The training program provided me the opportunity to present a solution for the research problem. I designed a 3-day professional development

training of support for general education teachers in order to help them feel more comfortable participating in placement practices and working with students with ID. The 3-day professional development training program contained both indirect and embedded support to teachers.

As a project developer, I know how important it is to capture and design a project that addresses the concerns raised by study participants. Creating a professional development training program that encompasses the support needed for general education teachers, such as providing information regarding the placement process for students with ID and providing information regarding the significant role that data play during process was a primary goal. Without knowledge of the placement process, general education may not have all the information to function as true participants during placement meetings. Another goal of the professional development training session was to develop a project that provided the basic foundational skills needed when working with students with ID to general education teachers. For general education teachers with little-to-no prior experience working with students with ID, this is essential. Lastly, it was important to design a professional project that would provide ongoing support to general education teachers throughout the school year. With this type of 3-day professional development training of support in process, general education teachers could feel more comfortable with students with ID resulting in increased participation for them in general education classrooms.

Research indicates that students with ID benefit greatly from participating in general education classrooms. Cai et al. (2022) pointed out that if children with

disabilities and various needs have exposure within the ordinary school system, they are more likely to engage with different learning styles and more comprehensive knowledge. My goal is to continue to pursue this endeavor to increase this opportunity for as many students with ID as appropriate. I serve on many different committees within the school district and am in a position to continue this initiative. I have the opportunity to monitor the progress of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* and to ensure that general education receives the support to feel more comfortable and be able to support students with ID in their classrooms successfully. Once the general education teachers fully understand the placement process and the foundational skills needed to support students with ID, they will be more willing to support increased participation for students with ID in their classrooms. The 3-day professional development training of support was designed to provide the support needed to general education teachers voiced during their interviews.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The goal of this project study is to bring positive social change for students with ID through increased access to general education classrooms. Research shows that when students with ID can participate in general education, the result is increased academic performance amid increased social interactions with nondisabled peers. From the participant interviews, the need for support for general education teachers regarding the placement process for students with ID and the need for supporting general education teachers could lead to an increase in the willingness to include students with ID more in general education classrooms. The data from the participant interviews indicated a lack of

knowledge regarding special education placement practices and a lack of experience working with students with ID. Once support is in place, the opportunity for students with ID participating in general education classrooms will increase. Positive social change will be realized with special education policy regarding placement practices for students with ID when it is revised, and training is provided to general education regarding their role during the placement process as well as the role of data during placement decisions. Another possible direction for this study would be to conduct the same study in either an elementary or a high school basis. It would be interesting to determine whether the same themes would emerge from the data as the study was specific to middle school.

Positive social change will also be realized when general education teachers have ongoing support regarding working with students with ID in their classrooms. When general education teachers are provided with foundational skills and ongoing professional development and support, they will be more comfortable, confident, and more willing to include students with ID in their classrooms.

The results of this study can be applied nationwide. A limitation of the professional development training program was that it was specific to middle school grade levels; however, a case could be made that this problem exists both at the elementary and high school level as well. The 3-day professional development training of support can be applied on every school campus nationwide. This would result in many students with ID being afforded the opportunity to increase participation in general education classrooms. The literature shows that students with ID are a population that has not shown significant improvement regarding inclusion. This study has the potential to

bring significant change to the common practice of keeping students with ID in separate classrooms. Increasing the number of students with ID in general education is a way to promote positive social change.

There are many directions that future research regarding this research topic can be pursued. One direction involves exploring the role of campus administrators in the placement practices for students with ID. Campus administrators play a major role in the decision making during ARDC placement meetings for students with ID. Acquiring the perceptions of campus administrators regarding placement practices for students with ID could result in new knowledge that could further increase inclusive opportunities for students with ID. Data could be collected from campus administrators through the form of personal interviews with a given set of questions.

Another possible future direction for this study would be to assess the effects of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*. A year after the implementation of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* it would be interesting to assess the effectiveness of the project and to confirm that the end result was an increase in general education participation for students with ID, which is the overall goal of this study. Reviewing the net effect of this professional development project could provide essential information regarding the needed changes to the training program either to enhance it or to ensure that it continues on an annual basis. The training program model could also be applied to other low incidence disability areas such as autism.

Conclusion

Based on the long history of excluding students with ID from mainstream classrooms, the need remains to increase the opportunities for students with ID to participate in general education classrooms. With the implementation of a 3-day professional development training geared toward providing information both indirectly and through embedded instruction regarding the placement process for students with ID and with providing ongoing classroom support for general education teachers, the number of students with ID participating in general education classrooms will increase. The responses from study participants provided insight regarding the merits of separate classrooms and the merits of mainstream classrooms. Data collected identified barriers to inclusion of students with ID in general education classrooms. The data collected from the personal interviews illuminated the need to increase the comfortability of general education teachers supporting students with ID. Increasing the comfortability and knowledge regarding students with ID will lead to increased participation. It was evident that there was a direct link between confidence, experience level, and lack of inclusion for students with ID. An important lesson learned from this study was that by addressing the lack of experience and comfort level from general education teachers, it could lead to increased opportunities for students with ID to participate in general education classes. This would provide them with the opportunity for increased academic performance and social interaction with their nondisabled peers. Through this journey, I have learned the process of beginning with an educational problem and applying a method of inquiry that is comprised of research, data collection, data analysis, recommendations, and possible

solutions. The method of inquiry was applied with an expected outcome of solutions and long-lasting positive social change, in this case, the result was the opportunity for more students with ID to participate in general education classrooms.

Providing general education teachers with professional development through the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* could result in higher numbers of students with ID participating in mainstream classrooms. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will help change current special education procedures regarding the placement practices for students with ID. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will also result in more teachers feeling confident about working with students with ID. The *Inclusion Professional Development Training* will serve as a model for other school districts to follow nationwide. Further research is needed regarding the placement practices of students with ID at both the elementary and high school level. Further research is also needed regarding campus administrator perceptions regarding placement practices for students with ID. As a result of this research study, the *Inclusion Professional Development Training* was designed to help bring positive social change for students with ID through increased access to general education classrooms. Inclusion of students with ID in general education classrooms is a complex issue, requiring a commitment to providing appropriate accommodations and support, as well as ongoing professional development for teachers. However, the benefits of inclusion for both students with ID and their nondisabled peers make it a worthwhile endeavor.

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Appendix A: The Project

The Inclusion Professional Development Training

Day 1

Decision-Making During Student Placement Meetings

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slides 1-2)

Opening Welcome. The welcome would be provided by the Executive Director of Special Education. The Executive Director of Special Education would review the agenda for the day as well as go over the learning objectives for Day 1. Afterward, the Executive Director of Special Education would introduce the special education coordinator over the Life Skills Program to participants.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slide 3)

The learning objectives would be presented to the group of teachers.

1. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to name various data sources that can be used during student placement meetings.
2. By the end of the professional development session, teachers would be able to utilize a decision-making flowchart when making placement recommendations for students with ID.
3. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to participate in mock student placement meetings and demonstrate new knowledge gained from the professional development session.

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. Morning Break

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 4-7)

Review of data sources

1. Academic Data Sources (grades, progress reports, teacher made observations & assessments.
2. Personal Data Sources: feedback from parents, student interviews, and student demographic information, and feedback from teachers
3. Current Levels of Performance Data: IEP paperwork, student evaluation data, student present levels of performance, and social and behavioral skills.

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. Lunch Break

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 8-13)

Participants will be given a copy of the decision-making flowchart that can be used to assist with student placement recommendations.

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

3:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 14-20)

All participants will view several videos regarding student placement meetings. They will be given time to ask questions and to seek any needed clarification. After the video and group discussion, participants will be placed into group to participant in mock student placement meetings. Meetings will be monitored by Special Education staff members and assistance will be provided when needed. At the conclusion of the mock student placement meetings, participants will be able to ask additional questions. Afterward, all participants will be asked to complete a survey regarding Day 1 of the *Inclusion Professional Development Training*.

Group Discussion-This is a time when participants can ask questions regarding any content that has been provided throughout the day.

Materials needed for Day 1

*-needed for presenter

**--needed for both presenter & participant

1. Laptop *
2. Projector *
3. Handout folders (Copy of presentation, LRE flowchart, Student Data Sources, IEP Roles & Responsibilities & Sample General Education Teacher Checklist **)
4. Wi-fi *
5. Campus location *
6. Small group set up (tables & chairs) *

7. Samples of Student Data Sources **
8. Decision-Making-Least Restrictive Environment Flowchart **
9. Student Placement Scenario Cards
10. Pencils, pens, and post-it notes **

The Inclusion Professional Development Training

Day 2

Foundational Skills Practice

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slides 1)

The Executive Director would deliver a welcome message to program participants. The second day of the professional development would be reviewed, and time allowed for questions. The executive director would introduce the members of the special education team who will provide the professional during the second day. Afterward, the executive director of special education would introduce the special education coordinator.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slide 2)

The learning objectives would be presented to the group of teachers.

1. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will receive foundational knowledge needed when working with students with ID in their classrooms.
2. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will learn instructional strategies & curricular modifications that can be used with students with ID.
3. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to write lesson plans that include instructional strategies and accommodations that can be used with students with ID.

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. Morning Break

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 4-5)

Foundational Knowledge and Skills

1. Review and Analyze Individual Education Plans
2. Present Instructional Strategies & Curricular Modifications
3. Practice Writing Lesson Plans with Instructional Strategies and Student Accommodations

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. Lunch Break

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 6-7)

The classroom teachers will work directly with special education staff to review and analyze student individualized education plans. Teachers will learn how to read them and how to use them when creating lesson plans.

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

3:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 8-12)

Using knowledge presented regarding instructional strategies, curricular modifications, IEP information, and student accommodations, teachers will practice curricular

modifications and document them into their lesson plans. Afterward, teachers will receive a post training survey to complete.

Group Discussion-This is a time when participants can ask questions regarding any content that has been provided throughout the day.

Materials needed for Day 2

*-needed for presenter

** -needed for both presenter & participant

1. Laptop *
2. Projector *
3. Handout folders (Copy of presentation, Sample IEPs, List of Instructional Strategies, and Sample Lesson Plans) **
4. Wi-fi *
5. Campus location *
6. Small group set up (tables & chairs) *
7. Sample Individualized Education Plans **
8. List of Instructional Strategies **
9. Sample Accommodated Lesson Plans**
10. Pencils, pens, and post-it notes **

The Inclusion Professional Development Training

Day 3

Embedded Professional Development in the Classroom

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slides 1)

The Executive Director would deliver a welcome message to program participants via ZOOM. The purpose for Day 3 of the professional development would be reviewed and time allowed for questions. The Executive Director would introduce the members of the Special Education team who will provide embedded professional development within the classrooms. Afterward, the Executive Director of Special Education would introduce the special education coordinator.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slides 2)

The learning objectives would be presented to the group of teachers.

1. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will direct professional development in the classroom while working with students with ID.
 2. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will work with special education staff and utilize skills and knowledge gained from Day 1 & Day
 3. By the end of the professional development session, teachers will feel more confident when working with students in their general education classrooms.
-

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. Morning Break

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 3)

Direct Professional Development & Support

1. Special Education Staff Provide Direct Professional Development and Assistance to Teachers
 2. Special Education Staff Provide Direct Professional Development and Support Regarding Academic and Behavioral Strategies
 3. Special Education Staff Observe Teacher Interaction with Students with ID and Provide Feedback
-

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. Lunch Break

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 4-5)

Special education teachers provide direct assistance to general education teachers while they work with students with ID in the classroom.

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

3:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 5-6)

Special Education staff observe while gradually releasing general education teachers on their own without direct assistance provided in the classroom. Special Education teachers

observe and debrief with general education teachers at the end of the class period. Afterward, a post-training survey will be provided.

Group Discussion-This is a time when participants can ask questions regarding any content that has been provided throughout the day.

Materials needed for Day 3

*-needed for presenter

** -needed for both presenter & participant

1. Classroom location *
2. Copy of Classroom Observation Form **
3. Sample Accommodated Lesson Plans**




Student Placement Meetings-Low Incidence Inclusion Program Training Day #1

By Kerry Armstead

Slide 1: Professional Development Day 1

Learning Objectives



By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to name various data sources that can be used during student placement meetings.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers would be able to utilize a decisionmaking flowchart when making placement recommendations for students with intellectual disabilities.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to participate in mock student placement meetings and demonstrate new knowledge gained from the professional development session.

Slide 2: Professional Development Day 1

Agenda



Review Data Sources



Decision-Making Flowchart



Mock Student Placement Meetings

Slide 3: Professional Development Day 1

Data Sources

Preconceived belief systems can impede access to general education classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities and has historically. Scores from intelligence tests influence perceptions and beliefs about student capacity and, thus, influence placement (Wehmeyer, 2021).

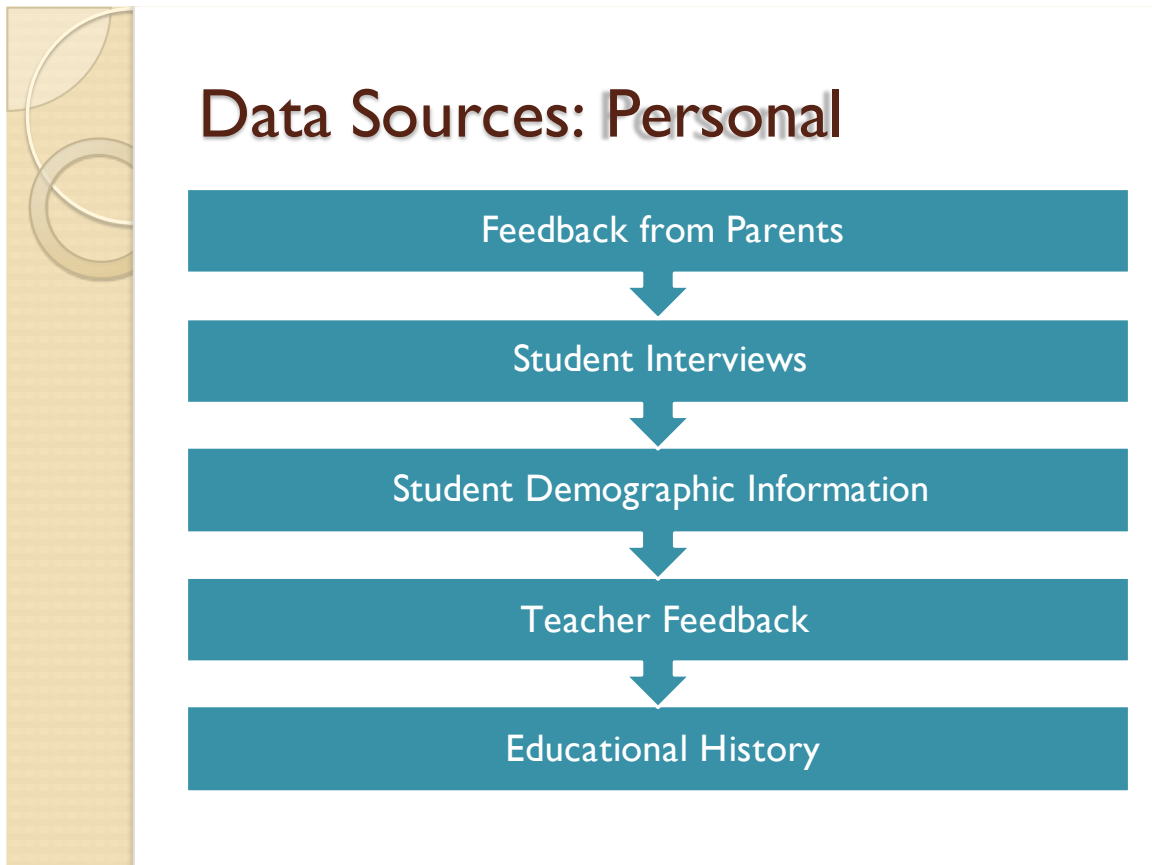
Understanding the role of data could lead to increased opportunities to participate in general education classes for students with ID. Kauffman (2021) noted, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to educating children with disabilities.

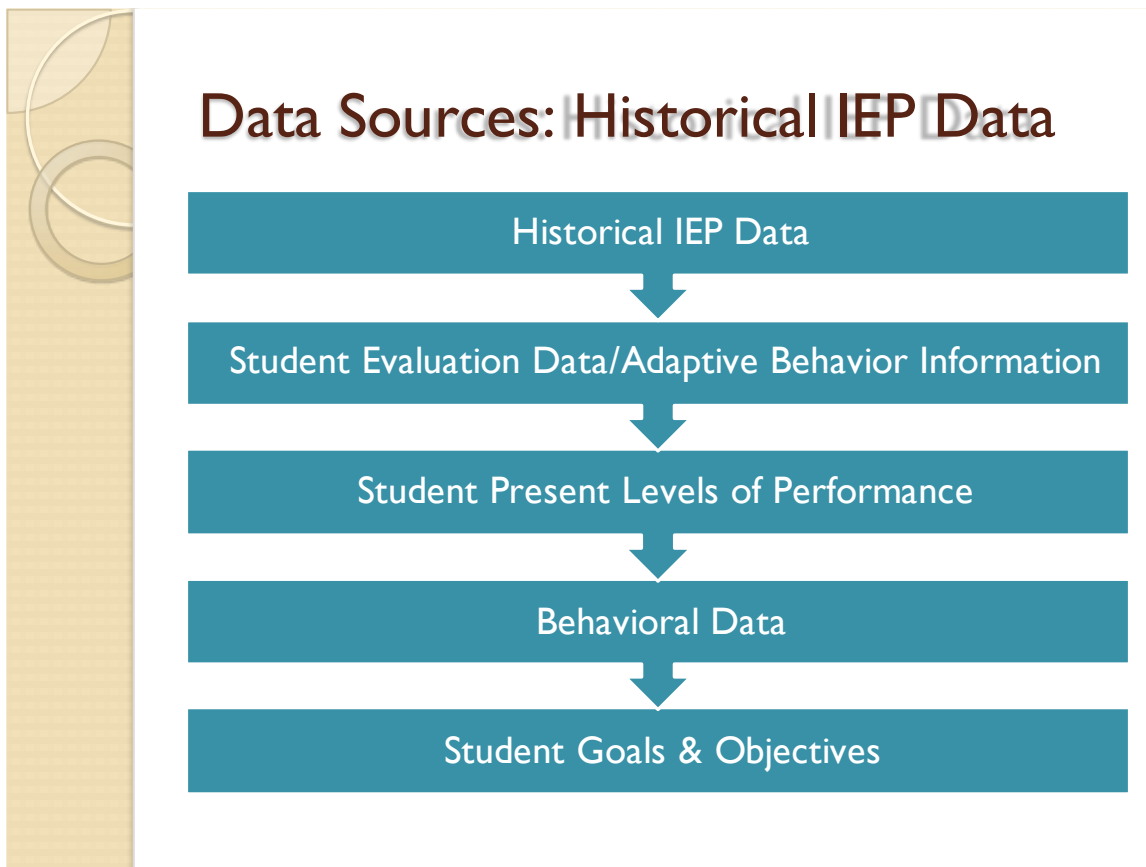
Slide 4: Professional Development Day 1

Multiple Data Sources

Multiple Data Sources can provide a complete, comprehensive analysis of student performance



Slide 5: Professional Development Day 1

Slide 6: Professional Development Day 1

Slide 7: Professional Development Day 1

Flowchart

Definition of *flowchart*

: a diagram that shows step-by-step progression through a procedure or system especially using connecting lines and a set of conventional symbols

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Flowchart. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved May 22, 2022, from <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/flowchart>

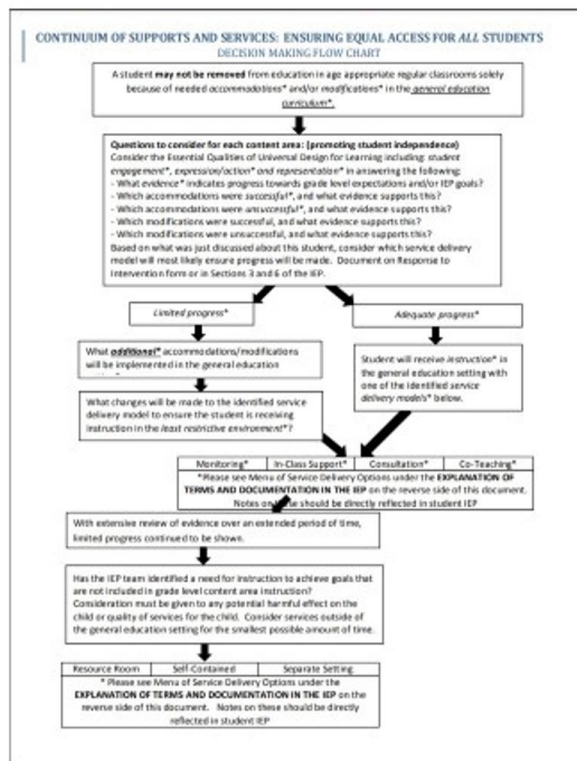
Slide 8: Professional Development Day 1

Reasons to Use a Decision-Making Flowchart

1. Capture Essential Steps
2. Workflow Management
3. Focus on Regulatory Requirements
4. Increase Objectivity
5. Effective Analysis

Slide 9: Professional Development Day 1

Least Restrictive Environment Flowchart



Slide 10: Professional Development Day 1

Least Restrictive Environment Flowchart

CONTINUUM OF SUPPORTS AND SERVICES: ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS DECISION MAKING FLOW CHART

EXPLANATION OF TERMS AND DOCUMENTATION IN THE IEP

Accommodations¹: Providing access to, but not altering the amount or complexity. Describe needs in Section 3 (Child Profile), Section 6 (Present Levels of Performance) and Section 7 (Accommodations) of the IEP.

Additional²: accommodations/modifications: considered different presentations, responses, setting, timing, scheduling, organizational skills accommodations; considered modifications to the curriculum and assignments.

Adequate progress³: Adequate meaning sufficient for a specific requirement or satisfactory and Progress meaning process of improving or developing something over a period of time. **Data** indicates student has made at least 25% or greater improvement over baseline every 9 weeks in order to achieve the measurable annual goal.

Evidence⁴: Something that furnishes proof. **Data** that may include, but not limited to, progress monitoring data, test scores, grades, behavioral observations to indicate the student is making progress toward **grade level expectations** and/or IEP goals.

Extended period of time: At least 6 to 6 weeks of data needs to be extensively reviewed.

General Education Curriculum⁵: The U.S. Department of Education's regulations implementing Part B of IDEA state that the general education curriculum "is the same curriculum as for non-disabled children." 34CFR §100.320(a)(9).

Grade Level Expectations⁶: Grade level expectation for all students according to the Ohio Learning Standards, and, the Academic Content Standards Extended for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Instruction⁷: High quality teaching of grade level standards to ALL students to substantially raise student achievement versus intervention that is designed to provide early, systematic, and appropriately intensive research-based assistance to children who are at risk for or already underperforming as compared to appropriate grade- or age-level standards.

Least Restrictive Environment⁸: a student with a disability has the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate, with access to the general education curriculum, or any other program that non-disabled peers would be able to access.

Limited progress⁹: Limited meaning confined within limits or restricted in Progress (improving or developing something over a period of time). **Data** indicates student has not made at least 25% improvement over baseline within a nine week period that indicates the student will not achieve the measurable annual goal.

Modification¹⁰: **Altering the content** (decreasing amount or complexity). Describe needs in Section 3 (Child Profile), Section 6 (Present Levels of Performance) and Section 7 (Modifications) of the IEP.

Service Delivery Models¹¹: instruction and supports provided in the general education classroom that include: Monitoring, In-Class Support, Consultation, and Co-Teaching. ¹²None of these should be directly reflected in Section 7: Support to School Personnel in student IEP.

• **Monitoring**: Students with disabilities are included in the general education setting with no direct services from a special education teacher. They may still be monitored or provided indirect support through consultative services to their general education teachers.

• **In-Class Support**: In this model, the special service provider gives support directly to the students in the general education classrooms. The special educator may be in the classroom for all or part of the instructional period every day or just for a few days a week. They provide support to the students through on-the-spot accommodations or modifications. In-class support may be provided through special education teachers or trained paraprofessionals.

¹ Ohio Accommodation Manual, p. 12

² Ohio Accommodation Manual, p. 12

³ Mantain-Webster (2015)

⁴ Mantain-Webster (2015)

⁵ Federal Guidance on IEPs-11-17-2005.pdf, US Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Dear Colleague Letter, November 16, 2005.

⁶ <http://education.ohio.gov/>

⁷ Cooper, C. A. & Pratkanis, E. M. (2009). *Meeting the Needs of Students of All Abilities*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

⁸ Ed.gov, U.S Department of Education

⁹ Mantain-Webster (2015)

¹⁰ Ohio Accommodation Manual, p. 12

¹¹ Murawski, W. W. & Diener, L. A. (2013). *Leading the Co-teaching Dance: Leadership Strategies to Enhance Team Outcomes*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children. Also: ODE: "Supplemental Student Learning Objective Development Guide: Teachers of Students with Disabilities", April, 2015.

Slide 11: Professional Development Day 1



Least Restrictive Environment Flowchart

CONTINUUM OF SUPPORTS AND SERVICES: ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS
DECISION MAKING FLOW CHART

- **Consultation:** In this model, the special education teacher provides facilitated support directly to the general education teacher. Support is provided to the general education teacher and the students through either co-planning, co-instructing, or co-exiting.
- **Co-Teaching:** In this model, support is provided to students with and without disabilities in the general education setting. This support is provided by both the special and general education teachers. The special educator is in the classroom on a regular basis. The two teachers are expected to co-plan, co-instruct and co-exit together.

Service Delivery Models¹²: Instruction and supports provided outside of the general education classrooms that include: Resource Room¹³, Self-Contained, and Separate Settings. ¹⁴Focus on these models is directly reflected in Section 77, Location of Service and Section 11: L&S of the state.

- **Resource Room¹⁵:** Sometimes a student is in general education classes but is "pulled out" by a special educator or related service provider for additional intervention. Educators can work to be collaborative by communicating about what each of them is doing and determining when it is best for the student to be "pulled out" and if there are other students who would benefit as well.
- **Self-Contained¹⁶:** Special education and related services are provided primarily by a highly qualified special education teacher in a separate classroom reserved for students with identified disabilities.
- **Separate Setting¹⁷:** Instruction is provided within an alternative school, the home, hospitals and institutions.

Student Engagement¹⁸: One of the three Essential Qualities of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.

Student Response/Action¹⁹: Another one of the three Essential Qualities of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), where students respond with preferred means of control can accommodate different strategic and motor systems of students.

Student Representation²⁰: Another one of the three Essential Qualities of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), where alternative modes of presentation reduce perceptual learning barriers, can adjust to different ways students recognize things.

Successful²¹: Defined as having the correct or desired result; ending in success. **Data** indicates the student IS making the expected rate of progress in comparison to same age peers.

Unsuccessful²²: Defined as not having or producing success; not successful. **Data** indicates the student IS NOT making the expected rate of progress in comparison to same age peers.

(Revised 3/2016)

¹² Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Effective July 1, 2014, Section 3303.51-09, Delivery of Services, 148-152. Also: ODC, "Supplemental Student Learning Objective Development Guide: Teachers of Students with Disabilities", April, 2015.

¹³ <http://www.cast.org/>

¹⁴ <http://www.cast.org/>

¹⁵ <http://www.cast.org/>

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster (DECS)

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster (DECS)

Slide 12: Professional Development Day 1



Student Placement Meetings

Slide 13: Professional Development Day 1

Student Placement Meetings



Slide 14: Professional Development Day 1

Student Placement Meetings

IEP Meeting Gen Ed Teacher Check List	
	Gather students present levels (reading level, district testing, etc.)
	Review current IEP goals
	Review student accommodations What's working? What should be added?
	Know students' service level (type of special education support) Is more support needed? Less support?
	Review new proposed goals with special education teacher and provide input
	Be prepared to share students progress in all subject areas which you provide instruction
	Bring materials to meeting to take notes
	Gather work samples if needed to show to IEP Committee
	Be prepared to answer any questions related to general education

Slide 15: Professional Development Day 1



Slide 16: Professional Development Day 1

Scenario #1

Analyzing IEP Data

During this mock placement meeting, participants will learn how to analyze IEP data prior to making a placement recommendation.

Slide 17: Professional Development Day 1

Scenario #2

Connecting IEP data with current student performance data

During this mock placement meeting, teachers will learn how to connect IEP data with current student performance data such as, grade, classwork, teacher-made assessments, and district assessments.

Slide 18: Professional Development Day 1

Scenario #3

Utilizing IEP data and student performance data to support placement recommendation that are in alignment with the student's least restrictive environment.

During this mock placement meeting, participants will learn how to use IEP data and student performance data to make placement recommendations that are appropriate for the student and in alignment with the student's least restrictive environment.

Slide 19: Professional Development Day 1

Wrap-Up & Conclusion



Slide 20: Professional Development Day 1

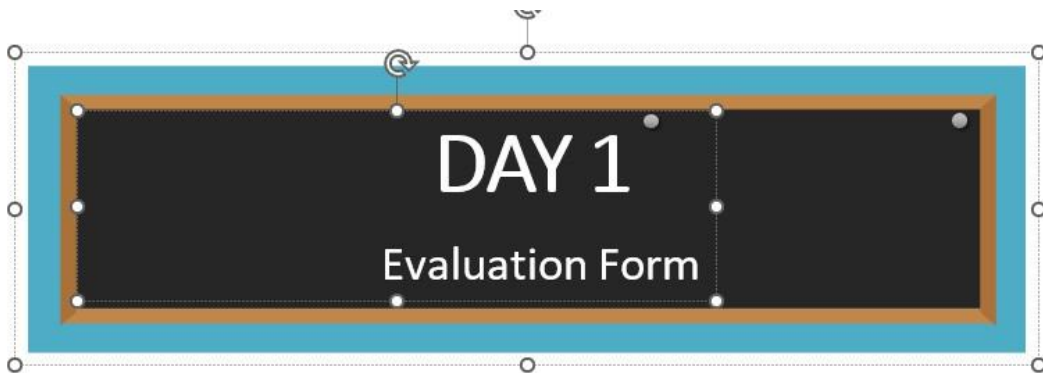
Take-Aways

1. Assess teacher's knowledge regarding various data sources that can be used during student placement meetings.
2. Assess and answer questions regarding the decision-making flowchart for placement recommendations for students with intellectual disabilities.
3. Discuss mock student placement meetings and session takeaways

Slide 21: Professional Development Day 1

References

- Kauffman, J. M., Wiley, A. L., Travers, J. C., Badar, J., & Anastasiou, D. (2021). Endrew and FAPE: Concepts and implications for all students with disabilities. *Behavior modification*, 45(1), 177-198.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Flowchart. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved May 22, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flowchart>
- Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Effective July 1, 2014. Section 3304 51-09, Delivery of Services, 149150. Also: ODE: "Supplemental Student Learning Objective Development Guide: Teachers of Students with Disabilities", April, 2015
- Wehmeyer, M. L., Shogren, K. A., & Kurth, J. (2021). The state of inclusion with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 18(1), 36-43.

Slide 22: Professional Development Day 1

List 2 new concepts that you learned today?

Was the information relevant to your current job position?

What additional information would you like to receive?



Student Placement Meetings-Low Incidence Inclusion Program Training Day #2

By Kerry Armstead

Slide 1: Professional Development Day 2

Learning Objectives

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will receive foundational knowledge needed when working with students with intellectual disabilities in their classrooms.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will learn instructional strategies & curricular modifications that can be used with students with intellectual disabilities.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will be able to write lesson plans that include instructional strategies and accommodations that can be used with students with intellectual disabilities.

Slide 2: Professional Development Day 2

Agenda



Foundational Knowledge & Skills



Instructional Strategies



Writing Lesson Plans

Slide 3: Professional Development Day 2

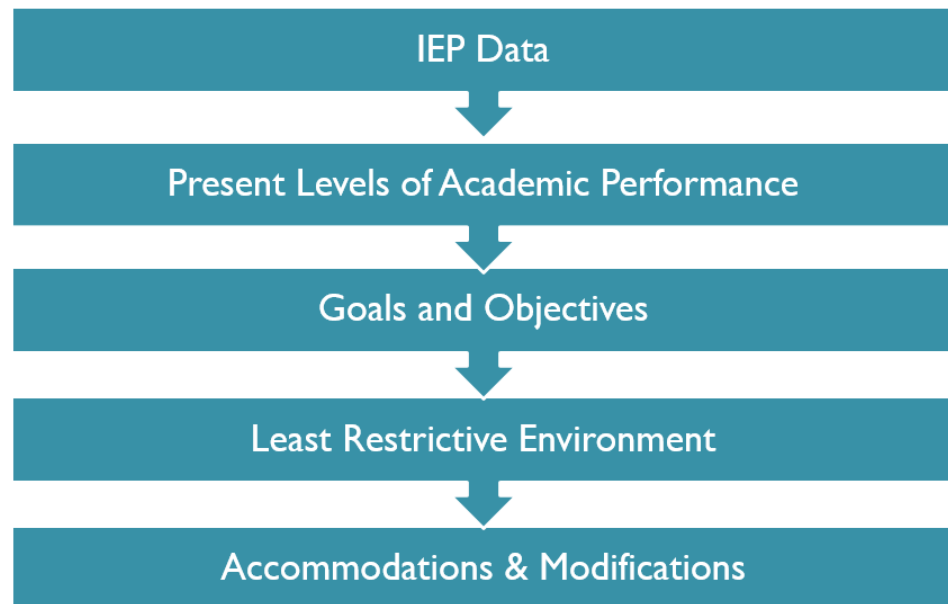
Foundational Skills and Knowledge

In addition to biases, teacher preparation might impose additional barriers to inclusive general education class placements for students with severe disabilities (Agran, 2020).

Along with providing opportunities for teachers to reflect and engage in discourse, it is imperative to explore specific strategies and tools for fostering an inclusive and responsive educational environment that gives voice to all students and promotes equitable access and opportunities (Samuels, 2018).

Slide 4: Professional Development Day 2

Low Incidence: Foundational Skills



Slide 5: Professional Development Day 2



Instructional Strategies to Promote Inclusive Teaching

Slide 6: Professional Development Day 2

Instructional Strategies (Discussion)

- IEP accommodations & modifications
- Differentiated Instruction (visual and hands-on activities)
- Picture Communication Systems
- Focus on Key Concepts
- Wait Time

Slide 7: Professional Development Day 2



Lesson Plans

Slide 8: Professional Development Day 2

Lesson Plans with Student Accommodations & Instructional Strategies Included

EP-AI-A-Glance	
Student: AV, JH Health/Allergies: Student has asthma and carries an inhaler. Student is able to use inhaler independently. Monitor student carefully during recess and gym to make sure the student is not out of breath.	
Goals	
Language Arts: Q11 Decoding words with short vowels, blends & digraphs. Q10 identify 40 unfamiliar sight words. Math: K20 Complete single-digit addition facts (0-9)	
Learning Style: AV is a visual learner. He benefits from tasks with a clear start and end point, short simple directions and repeated practice opportunities.	
Accommodations & Modifications	
Behavior: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage independence • Facilitate conversations between • Allow student to practice walking without use of walker for short periods of time throughout the day • Discourage off-topic comments and questions 	Academic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow the use of anchor charts

Slide 9: Professional Development Day 2



Slide 10: Professional Development Day 2

Scenario #1

Lesson Plan Writing Practice #1

Create a 5th grade lesson plan on multiple meaning words, include instructional strategies & student accommodations for a student with intellectual disabilities

Slide 11: Professional Development Day 2

Scenario #2

Lesson Plan Writing Practice #2

Create a 3rd grade lesson plan regarding sequence and include instructional strategies & student accommodations for a student with intellectual disabilities

Slide 12: Professional Development Day 2

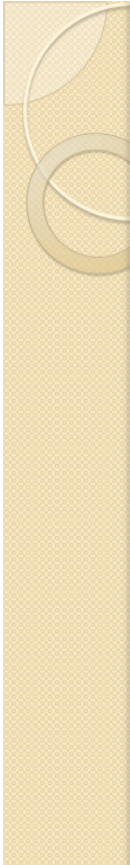
Wrap-Up & Conclusion



Slide 13: Professional Development Day 2

Take-Aways

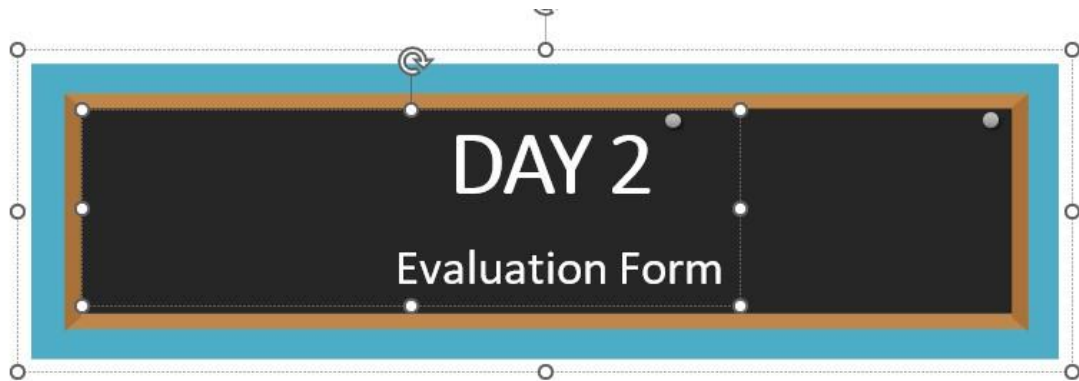
1. Assess teacher's knowledge regarding foundational knowledge needed when working with students with intellectual disabilities in their classrooms.
2. Assess and answer questions regarding learn instructional strategies & curricular modifications that can be used with students with intellectual disabilities.
3. Discuss writing lesson plans that include instructional strategies and accommodations that can be used with students with intellectual disabilities and session takeaways.

Slide 14: Professional Development Day 2

References

- Agran, M., Jackson, L., Kurth, J.A., Ryndak, D., Burnette, K., Jameson, M., ... & Wehmeyer, M. (2020). Why aren't students with severe disabilities being placed in general education classrooms: Examining the relations among classroom placement, learner outcomes, and other factors. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 45(1), 4-13.
- Samuels, A. J. (2018). Exploring Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teachers' Perspectives on Fostering Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms. *SRATE Journal*, 27(1), 22-30.

Slide 15: Professional Development Day 2



List 2 new concepts that you learned today?

Was the information relevant to your current job position?

What additional information would you like to receive?



**Student Placement Meetings-Low
Incidence Inclusion Program
Training Day #3
*Classroom Practicum***

By Kerry Armstead

Slide 1: Professional Development Day 3

Learning Objectives

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will direct professional development in the classroom while working with students with intellectual disabilities.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will work with special education staff and utilize skills and knowledge gained from Day 1 & Day 2.

By the end of the professional development session, teachers will feel more confident when working with students in their general education classrooms.

Slide 2: Professional Development Day 3

Agenda

Embedded Professional Development

coplanning coteaching Professional Learning Communities
coassessing diffusion of innovations Job Embedded
Professional Development

Teacher Collaboration: Special Education
Teachers & General Education Teachers

Slide 3: Professional Development Day 3

Embedded Professional Development

Coaching or professional development for teachers requires observing teachers' instructional strategies in classrooms, providing informative feedback, and guiding the mastery of new skills (Gubbins, 2021).

Slide 4: Professional Development Day 3



Slide 5: Professional Development Day 3



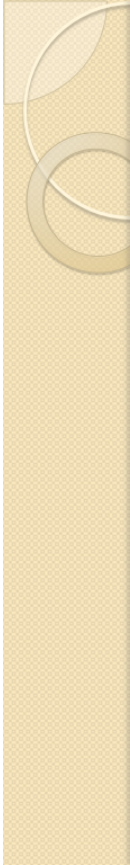
Teacher Collaboration & Observation

PROFICIENT	EXEMPLARY <i>(in observation or Proficient peer or in work or the field)</i>	PROFICIENT	EXEMPLARY <i>(in observation or Proficient peer or in work or the field)</i>
<p>Uses incentives and flexible groupings that respectfully engage students as demonstrating new learning in multiple ways, including application of new learning to make connections between concepts.</p> <p>Implements instruction that provides multiple opportunities for students to develop independence as learners.</p>	<p>Engages student interests, self-direction, and choice of resources and/or flexible groupings to develop their learning.</p> <p>Provides opportunities for students to approach learning tasks in ways that will be effective for them as individuals.</p>	<p>Uses multiple resources to facilitate groupings to actively engage learners in new learning and facilitate connections between concepts and/or across settings.</p> <p>Implements service delivery that provides multiple opportunities for learners to develop independence and take responsibility for the learning.</p>	<p>Fosters learner ownership, self-direction, and choice of available resources or flexible groupings.</p> <p>Supports and challenges learners to identify ways to approach learning that will be effective for them as individuals.</p>
OCT Effective Teaching 3b, 2017		OCT Effective Service Delivery 3b, 2017	
<p>Provides individualized, descriptive feedback that is accurate, actionable, and helps students advance their learning.</p> <p>Adjusts instruction as necessary in response to individual and group performance.</p>	<p>Provides opportunities for students to self-reflect and/or provide peer feedback that is specific and focuses on advancing student learning.</p> <p>Provides opportunities for students to independently select strategies that will be effective for them as individuals.</p>	<p>Provides feedback that is specific, timely, accurate, and supports the improvement toward academic or social-behavioral outcomes.</p> <p>Adjusts to service delivery in response to learners' performance or engagement in tasks.</p>	<p>Fosters self-reflection and/or peer feedback that is specific and focused on advancing learning.</p> <p>Develops differentiated methods to obtain feedback from learners in order to assist in adjustment of service delivery.</p>
OCT Effective Teaching 4c, 2017		OCT Effective Service Delivery 3c, 2017	

Slide 6: Professional Development Day 3

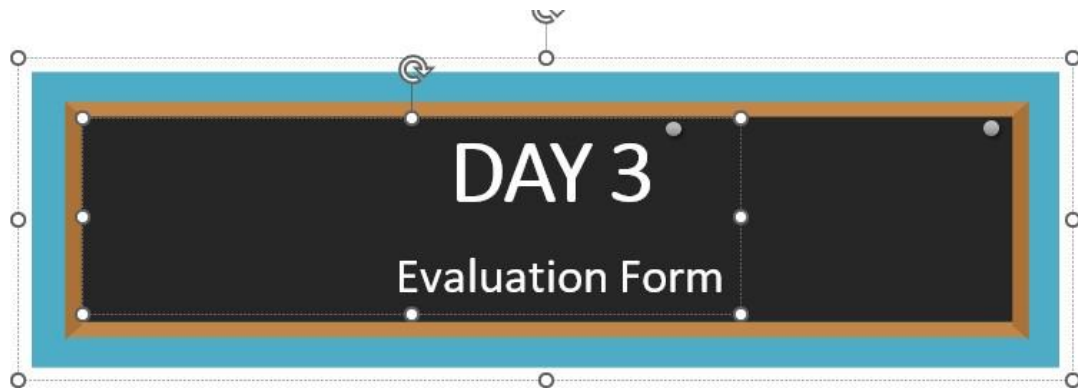
Wrap-Up & Debrief Session



Slide 7: Professional Development Day 3

References

- Gubbins, E. J., & Hayden, S. M. (2021). Professional development. *Critical Issues and Practices in Gifted Education: A Survey of Current Research on Giftedness and Talent Development*.

Slide 8: Professional Development Day 3

List 2 new concepts that you learned today?

Was the information relevant to your current job position?

What additional information would you like to receive?