

**ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO  
CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES  
AND THEIR NON-DISABLED PEERS IN INCLUSION CLASSROOM SETTINGS**

by  
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A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Education

Baltimore, Maryland  
November 2023

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## **Abstract**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) emphasize improved academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Additionally, IDEA ensures that public and private school students have the right to be educated with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment. Students with disabilities (SWDs) spend at least 80% of their time in the general education setting. However only 8% of SWDs in Washington, DC perform on grade level, compared to 50% of students without disabilities performing on grade level. Using focus groups and surveys, teachers in Washington, DC were able to share their experiences, perspectives, and views regarding teaching SWDs in their inclusion classrooms. The results of this qualitative study showed that teachers desire more professional development around special education law, pedagogy, and IEPs to feel more confident using inclusion pedagogy to support teaching SWDs.

*Keywords:* Inclusion, SWD, professional development, special education law, IEPs, inclusive classroom setting, pedagogy, specific learning disability

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Doctor of Education Program
Dissertation Approval Form

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Date: 11/28/2023

Dissertation Title:

Assessing the effectiveness of professional development to close the Achievement Gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in inclusion classroom settings.

The student has made all necessary revisions, and we have read and approve this dissertation for submission to the Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for all of their hard work, patience, continuous feedback, and commitment. Dr. Kristin Barbour, you really pushed me through this whole process and kept me motivated on days I felt like giving up. You mentioned the quote, “There is only one way to eat an elephant: a bite at a time” to me during the beginning of the program, and it stuck with me straight throughout my journey. Dr. Laura Shaw, you joined my committee midway through my journey, and you picked up all the pieces and supported me as if you started with me from day one, and I appreciate that. Lastly, Dr. Natalie Duvall, thank you for your check-ins, kind words, and your ability to separate academics and personal life. You also knew what to say especially after a milestone (comps, defense) within my journey.

A special thank you to Cam and Tonya. You embraced me with open arms, whether it was a phone call, a text message, lunch, or a Zoom session. Thank you for pouring into me and the endless support we gave each other through this program. I needed both of you to make it through.

Most importantly, I would like to recognize my principals for allowing me to conduct my interventions and to collect data within the schools. The teachers within my context who took time out of their busy schedules to participate. I could not do any of this without a strong village.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family.

A special gratitude to my parents, Patricia and Derek, who have been my supporters from the very beginning. Thank you for encouraging me and supporting me. You sacrificed so much throughout life to make sure I was able to achieve all of my dreams. I love and appreciate you more than you know.

To my aunts and cousin, Marissa, Michelle, and Aunt Suzie, thank you for the listening ear, being solution oriented when I lost all hope, and believing that I can do it.

To Myngkarri, Myoni, and Kyasi, you can do anything you put your mind too.

To Don, thank you for being one of my biggest cheerleaders, even on my lowest days.

To Ebony, thank you for your check-ins and reminding me of what I am capable of.

To Aunt Cheryl, thank you for all your wise words and guidance. I know that you are looking over me every step of the way.

To my family and friends: Your love and encouragement from near and far has kept me grounded, and I appreciate you.

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## **Executive Summary**

This study examined the factors that contribute to the achievement gap of students with disabilities (SWDs) in an inclusion classroom setting. For the purposes of this study, the achievement gap is defined as occurring when a specific group of students significantly academically outperforming other student groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Within this context, students without disabilities significantly outperform their peers with disabilities. The principles of inclusion dictate that SWDs should be held to the same expectations as their non-disabled peers in the general education classroom setting (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Teachers' self-efficacy, perceptions of teaching SWDs, and knowledge of special education are noted factors that contributed to the achievement gap in the inclusion classroom setting.

## **Problem of Practice**

Every child deserves to succeed academically, and ensuring success is challenging because each child develops differently. Educational equity, which involves equal academic achievement, fairness, inclusion, and opportunity in education for all students, is important for academic success (Western Governors University, 2021). Despite educational equity beliefs and reform efforts to improve student outcomes for all learners, SWDs consistently fall academically behind their same-aged peers. In the researcher's context in the District of Columbia, on the 2019 English Language Arts Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exam, nine out of every 20 students without a disability performed at grade level (Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE], 2019). Comparatively, only two of every 20 SWDs and one of every 20 students with SLDs performed at grade level, highlighting a vast achievement gap between SWDs and their non-disabled peers. There is a historical and current persistent

achievement gap for SWDs in reading. The achievement gap in reading is an issue because students who are not proficient readers by fourth grade are less likely to finish school (Hernandez, 2011). Dropping out of school with reading difficulties may result in negative economic or social impacts, including incarceration (Sublett & Chang, 2019). Additionally, students who drop out of school are more likely to work lower-wage jobs than high school graduates and individuals with college degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which explains that human development happens through different interactions with interconnected environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory informed this study by connecting the factors that contributed to the achievement gap for SWDs, who are impacted by federal laws, educational policies, and teachers' self-efficacy, among other influences.

### **Review of the Relevant Literature**

#### **Shift to Inclusion Classrooms**

Before the shift to inclusion classrooms, SWDs did not have access to a public school education. Additionally, they had separate classes from their non-disabled peers. The Education for Handicapped Children Act, later known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), gave SWDs an opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers in the same classroom setting, as well as access to free appropriate public education. IDEA protected the educational rights of SWDs and advocacy for parents to ensure accommodations were provided for SWDs to access the general education curriculum (Turnbull, 2005). The inclusive classroom setting was formed after IDEA was enacted, meaning SWDs should spend 80% or more of their time in classrooms with their non-disabled peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

## **Teachers Perceptions of Teaching Students With Disabilities**

Students with disabilities have mandated Individualized Education Program (IEP), which specifies the specialized instruction, accommodations, modifications, and other related services tailored to each student's individual needs to close achievement gaps. Based on the IEP, teachers are responsible for providing the accommodations, modifications, and other services in the general education setting. For teachers to implement these accommodations and provide effective services that are stated in students' IEPs, teachers have to be educated and informed about special education law before they enter the classroom (Schimmel & Militello, 2007). However, teachers lack the formal training to understand IEPs; usually, the information they do receive comes from other colleagues (O'Connor et al., 2016). Having knowledge of special education law and IEPs also increases teachers' self-efficacy (Burke & Sutherland, 2004) and positive perceptions (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) of teaching SWDs because teachers are more knowledgeable, confident, and better prepared to teach SWDs. According to Jeral (2007), increases in teacher confidence lead to corresponding improvements in student achievement.

## **Professional Development**

Professional development is common within school systems to help teachers learn and master the skills they need to be effective in the classroom. Numerous research studies support the notion that continuous professional development improves teacher self-efficacy (Bruce et al., 2010), perceptions of teaching SWDs (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009), and student academic outcomes (Chu et al., 2020; Courtade et al., 2017). These benefits associated with professional development align with the needs conveyed by inclusion teachers in a needs assessment conducted for this study.

## **Research Purpose and Design**

Based on the needs assessments data from both contexts and the literature review, it is recommended for inclusion teachers to have access and opportunities to participate in professional development, especially through the school. Professional development helps teachers improve leadership skills within their specific contexts, creating environments populated by high-quality teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Continuous professional development has been demonstrated to improve knowledge and self-efficacy among K–12 general education and special education teachers (Huai et al., 2006; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Royster et al., 2014). The first mixed methods need assessment conducted for this study focused on teachers' self-efficacy, perception of teaching SWDs, knowledge of special education laws, and instructional practices in working to reduce the reading achievement gap. Due to the researcher moving to a new work context, a second needs assessment was conducted in the new context. This second qualitative needs assessment focused on inclusion teachers' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and support needs within the inclusion classroom setting.

## **Findings**

Both needs assessments indicated that teachers with 1 or more years of experience had little or no experience with teaching SWDs in the inclusive classroom setting due to lack of knowledge or training. All participants from both contexts had positive attitudes towards receiving support and a willingness to participate in professional development. Lastly, supports from leaders to teach strategies applicable to the inclusive classroom setting were suggested as a support need. Both needs assessments provided a segue to potential next steps, which included providing opportunities for inclusion teachers to have access to several professional development workshops, individualized learning modules, and professional learning communities during the

school year to feel more confident and effective while teaching SWDs in an inclusive classroom to work towards closing the achievement gap.



## Chapter 1

### Problem of Practice and Literature Review

Two laws that support educational reforms facilitating students receiving appropriate and equitable education are the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002) emphasized student academic outcomes for students with disabilities (SWDs; Lingo et al., 2011). Additionally, IDEA (2004) ensured that public or private school students have the right to be educated with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment. These federal government acts provide SWDs an opportunity for educational inclusion, to learn in a general education setting with their peers, and to address their specialized needs based on their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Schools attempting to switch to inclusion classrooms do so to address the concern that educating SWDs separately from their mainstream peers creates a disadvantage, in part due to decreased contact with mainstream peers and lack of exposure to general education instructional practices (Gordon, 2006; Thurlow, 2004).

Nationally, in the United States, 7.1 million students are identified with a disability under IDEA (2004), and 33% are identified with a specific learning disability (SLD; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). IDEA (2004) defined an SLD as a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE], 2019, slide 111). Under IDEA (2004), students have to show a discrepancy in one or more of the following areas to be identified as a student with an SLD: “oral expression, reading fluency skills, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics

calculation, basic reading skill, and mathematics problem solving” (IDEA, 2004, Section 300.8). This dissertation focuses on the academic achievement gap in reading for students under the classification of SLDs in inclusion classrooms.

### **Problem of Practice**

Every child deserves to succeed academically, and ensuring success is challenging as each child develops differently. Educational equity, a belief to make academic achievement, fairness, inclusion, and opportunities in education equal for all students, is important for academic success. Despite educational equity beliefs and reform efforts to improve student outcomes for all learners, SWDs consistently fall academically behind their same-aged peers. In the researcher’s context in the District of Columbia, on the 2019 English Language Arts Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exam, nine out of every 20 students without a disability performed at grade level (OSSE, 2019). Comparatively, only two of every 20 SWDs and one of every 20 students with SLDs performed at grade level, highlighting a vast achievement gap between SWDs and their non-disabled peers. There is a historical and current persistent achievement gap for SWDs in reading. The achievement gap in reading is an issue because students who are not proficient readers by fourth grade are less likely to finish school (Hernandez, 2011). Dropping out of school with reading difficulties may result in negative economic or social impacts or incarceration (Sublett & Chang, 2019). Also, dropping out of school will cause students to work in jobs with lower wages.

### **Synthesis of Literature**

Researchers examine many factors to understand better the reading achievement gap for students with SLDs in inclusion classrooms. This chapter examines factors within a nested ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013) that contribute to the achievement

gap in reading for SWDs. The most common factors associated with the reading achievement gap for students with SLDs are the shift to inclusion models in general education classrooms (Bray & Russell, 2018), teachers' knowledge or experiences with IEPs and SWDs (Beutel & Tangen, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016), professional development (Leko & Brownell, 2009), and teachers' perceptions of teaching SWDs (Markova et al., 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015), all of which are examined in the subsequent literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

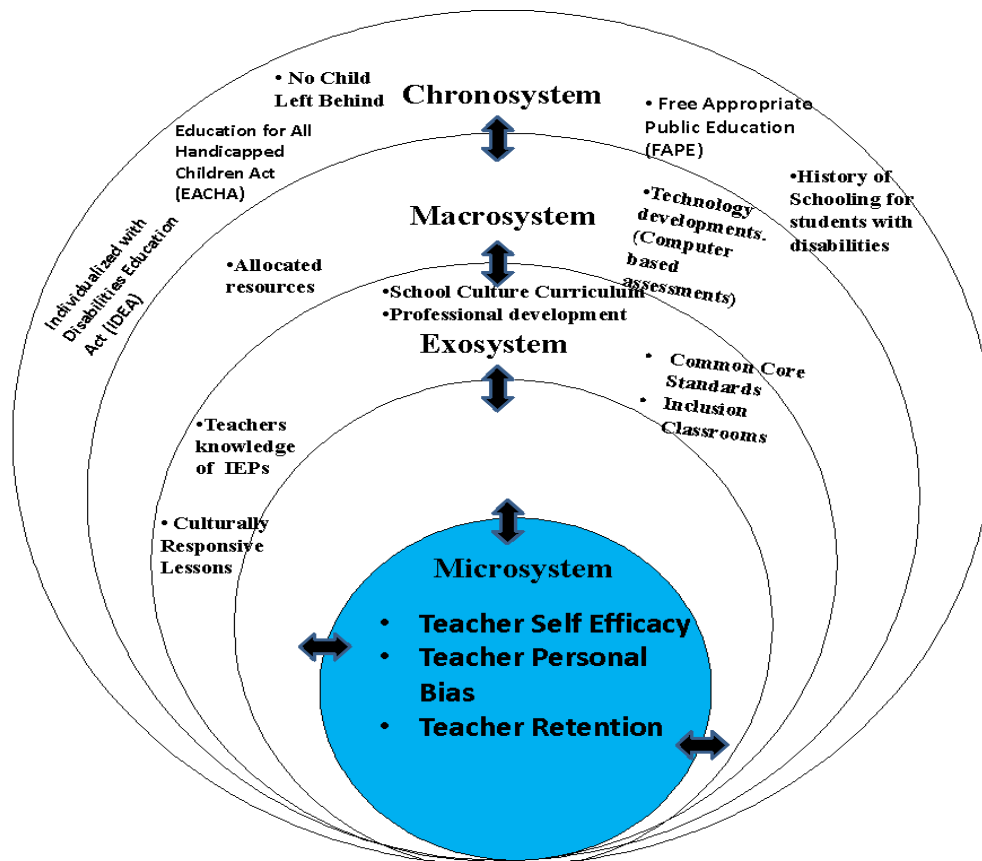
The theoretical framework, nested ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), was used to examine the factors impacting the reading achievement of SWD within a system's thinking approach. The nested ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a framework for Chapter 1 to identify and examine the underlying factors that contributed to the reading achievement gap for SWDs, the relationship between the factors that contributed to the achievement gap, and how the factors overlapped (Neal & Neal, 2013). The ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework informed this study by viewing the interactions contributing to a child's reading achievement as a nested network from the broadest distal system factors to those closest to the individual. This ecological system consists of the chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research related to chronosystem-level issues includes the transitions of educational law reform that contribute to the child's educational achievement. The macrosystem examines the society's cultural beliefs (e.g., systems of resource distribution and educational equity). Using the ecological systems theory lens, factors within the ecosystem-level of SWDs experience include social settings that indirectly affect the child, such as educational policies (e.g., Common Core State Standards, teacher knowledge of special education). The mesosystem consists of the

interactions between different microsystems (e.g., the school’s environment stemming from professional development and the professional development’s impact on teachers’ pedagogy in their inclusion classroom, interaction with the community, and students’ interaction with teachers). Lastly, the microsystem focuses on interactions that influence the child directly. In this research, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is used to view teachers’ role in closing the achievement gap for students with SLDs in reading (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Nested Ecological Systems Theory*



**Chronosystem**

The chronosystem provides an organizational structure to examine the factors that shed light on the turning points in educational reform history, specifically special education laws that

address educational equity for students with SLDs. Examining the achievement gap of SWDs in reading within an inclusion setting through a historical lens, specifically relevant education laws addressing educational equity and achievement outcomes for SWDs, shows underlying factors that affect reading achievement outcomes for SWDs.

### ***Education for All Handicapped Children Act***

One major education reform impacting SWDs is the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. EAHCA was created to meet the needs of SWDs and improve the academic results for SWDs. The EAHCA was implemented because SWDs were excluded from receiving a public education before this act.

**Accessibility.** The EACHA ensured that it was the local education agency's (LEA) responsibility that every student with a disability has access to the same curriculum and opportunities as their non-disabled peers under free appropriate public education. A local education agency is a public school with administrative control in a school district. Accessibility happens when SWDs access the same grade-level curriculum as their non-disabled peers. Educational inequality of SWDs was not allowed in general education classrooms or allowed to be educated prior to EAHCA and NCLB (2002; Cooc, 2022). SWDs should receive the same daily lessons as non-disabled peers with accommodations or modifications as stated in their IEP in the least restrictive environments to provide accessible public education (IDEA, 2004).

**Least Restrictive Environment.** Schools also implement the student's IEP in the least restrictive environment (Sumbera et al., 2014). A least restrictive environment is part of IDEA (2004), which states that SWDs should be taught in the general education setting with their non-disabled peers. EACHA protected the rights of SWDs and their parents, ensuring that SWDs could access free education. Because of civil rights injustices or educational inequality, SWDs

were historically denied before EACHA was enacted. The advancement of educational equity for SWDs through EACHA law led to other special education laws. The EACHA law of 1975 was amended in 1997. It is now called IDEA (2004). IDEA is the current legislation overseeing special education at the federal level.

The legislative regulations in IDEA allow parents to make decisions involving their child's education, covering the educational needs of SWD until they are the age of 21. Under IDEA, SWDs are entitled to free, appropriate public education that meets their needs. IDEA mandated that all SWDs have access to free public education, protects the educational rights of both the student and the parent, provides teachers and parents with resources to improve academic results, and assists state and federal agencies by providing education through funding and training (Turnbull, 2005). Furthermore, IDEA (2004) ensured that every child with a disability has an IEP individualized to their specific needs that incorporates accommodations needed for the child to access the general education curriculum and standardized testing (20 U.S.C. § 1444(d)(1)(A)). EACHA and IDEA (2004) mandates aim to have all children proficient in core academic subjects.

### ***No Child Left Behind***

The focus on accessibility in EACHA and, subsequently, the least restrictive environment in IDEA (2004) are turning points in educational reforms that led to NCLB (2002). This act held school districts accountable for hiring qualified teachers to work toward closing the historical and current achievement gap for SWD.

**Accountability.** In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into federal law the NCLB Act (2002). NCLB held schools accountable for student growth and worked toward closing the achievement gap for all students through federal Title I funding. NCLB was designed to measure

students' proficiency on state-wide reading and math standards from third to eighth grade. Student academic proficiency is measured as an indicator to ensure all students, including SWD, are achieving appropriate educational outcomes (IDEA, 2004).

High-stakes testing determined proficiency and was put in place by mandated laws to work toward having all students proficient in reading and mathematics (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). Importantly, NCLB (2002) was not designed to guarantee proficiency for all students. However, because NCLB created an increased focus on teacher accountability for all students' achievement, teachers prioritized aligning IEPs to learning standards instead of addressing the individual learning needs of the SWDs within the inclusion setting (Bray & Russell, 2018).

**Inclusion.** NCLB (2002) aligned with IEPs to include SWDs in general education while still receiving special education support (Bray & Russell, 2018). For SWDs to reach proficiency in core academic subjects in inclusive settings, they must have the services and levels of needed support documented in their IEPs (Smith et al., 2010).

**Highly-Qualified Teachers.** NCLB (2002) also required schools to hire high-qualified teachers. Qualified teachers refer to certification in special education and specific content required for special educators to be considered highly qualified because of the shift in inclusion (Brownell et al., 2009). Special educators must be able to teach general education content to support SWDs in the general education setting with the inclusive model (Bray & Russell, 2018). Despite the intent of federal laws to promote educational equity for all, within the researcher's context, the OSSE (2019) indicated that 5% of students in the 2018–2019 school year with SLDs performed at grade level compared to 45% of students without a disability, showing that the academic gap persists.

## **Macrosystem**

Examining the historical shift in educational reform toward more federal oversight of special education sets the stage for examining the next ecological system, the macrosystem. The macrosystem examines the cultural and economic factors influencing SWDs, specifically in this dissertation, how resources are distributed within schools for all students to access education (Hanushek, 2016). Factors involving resource allocation, such as teacher qualification and per pupil expenditure (Hanushek, 2016), highlight the importance of the education supply and demand chain (Jacob, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003) stemming from federal education reform laws. This supply and demand chain influences hiring and retaining qualified teachers (Fideler et al., 2000); U.S. Department of Education, 2003) and impacts reading achievement outcomes for SWDs (Burke & Sutherland, 2004).

### ***Resource Allocation***

In this dissertation, resource allocation refers to how “money is distributed across students with disabilities” to improve learning (Downey & Condrón, 2016, p.213). Resource allocation refers to both the distribution of highly qualified special education teachers and the distribution of per-pupil spending to improve learning for SWDs. NCLB (2002) held schools accountable for hiring highly qualified teachers. The legal requirement for highly qualified teachers necessitates low-income communities and urban neighborhood schools to have highly qualified teachers and provide monies to support the requisite hiring. However, Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) found that less qualified or preservice teachers are often placed within low-income communities. Nonqualified teachers and a shortage of special education teachers within the school system expand the achievement gap for SWDs because they have weaker academic backgrounds than others, are less equipped to teach, and work in poor work



conditions, it may be difficult for student achievement (Grissom et al., 2015; Murnane & Steele, 2007).

Additionally, the requirement for highly qualified teachers raises another question about whether highly qualified equates to effective teaching (Jacob, 2007). Because every teacher is different, their effectiveness varies. Murnane and Steele (2007) mentioned a minimal difference in effectiveness between teachers who are licensed or have completed a teaching program and those who are unlicensed.

### ***Lack of Highly Qualified Teachers.***

The research examining the effect of teacher qualifications on student achievement outcomes is mixed. In one study, preservice teachers were seen in a negative light due to being less qualified, which can be detrimental to SWDs' achievement (Stites et al., 2018). If teachers are unprepared or less qualified, implementing inclusion practices effectively may not be easy. Stites et al. (2018) conducted a mixed-method study with 120 preservice teachers. Participants were chosen from two universities, including early childhood, elementary, or special education teachers. Teachers completed an online survey of six open-ended and six Likert-scale questions to gain insight into preservice teachers' perceptions of inclusion teaching and their preparedness to teach in an inclusion setting. Findings showed that special education preservice teachers felt unprepared to teach SWDs because of the shift to inclusion teaching and lack of support from administration leaders. Teachers wanted more hands-on practice with differentiation to effectively teach in inclusion settings. Alternatively, other researchers indicate that preservice teachers are seen positively because, with preparation and confidence, they can improve SWDs' achievement (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Highly qualified teachers as a resource allocation impact SWDs because they may positively contribute to mitigating the reading achievement gap

for SWDs and ensuring students are not left behind by their general education peers in core subjects.

### ***special education Teacher Shortages***

In addition to a lack of highly qualified teachers, public schools also struggle to adequately fund the human capital needed to meet the requirements for highly-qualified special education teachers. Fideler et al. (2000) stated that 98% of American school districts had a shortage of special education teachers. Along with Fideler et al. (2000), the U.S. Department of Education (2003) stated that the shortage of special education teachers will continue, and 11% of special educators are uncertified. Research shows that the shortage of special education teachers is due to supply and demand (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Jacob, 2007). With NCLB (2002) in place, there is a higher demand for highly qualified teachers, especially in special education, because special education teachers have more responsibilities (Murnane & Steele, 2007) than general education teachers (i.e., IEP meetings, updating paperwork, and teaching students with more academic challenges). Examining the supply and demand chain for highly qualified teachers highlights how the local schools demand special education teachers, and state districts are responsible for supplying schools with high-quality teachers (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003).

Two qualifications under NCLB (2002) specifically impacting SWDs are hiring high-quality teachers and holding the schools and teachers accountable for ensuring that students are proficient on standardized testing. Along with the academic achievement accountability pressures of NCLB are inequalities in teacher's salaries and school conditions (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Jacob, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). The shortage of special education teachers can negatively impact SWDs because students have not received the

support and services mandated by their IEPs. Consequently, teachers typically leave low-income schools to work at wealthier schools to receive better resources and support (Hanushek et al., 2001).

### ***Pupil Spending***

In the District of Columbia in 2020, the annual amount spent to educate a general education student was \$22,856 per pupil, the second highest per-pupil expenditure in all 50 states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). For over 50 years, even with increased educational spending, there has been no change in students' achievement within the United States (Hanushek, 2016). This issue shows that more research is needed to determine if or why per-pupil expenditure correlates to student achievement. With increased per-pupil expenditure to pay qualified teachers, increased student achievement is expected but unrealized (Hanushek, 2016).

### ***Professional Development***

Resource allocation relates to factors such as developing teachers to feel more confident in teaching their content through professional development and retaining teachers to reduce the overall achievement gap (Shapiro & Laine, 2005). The amount of money schools spend to train and develop teachers, buy curricula to help students pass high-stakes testing, and provide a safe environment for students is essential. However, without students making academic gains, it raises the question of the importance of money (Hanushek, 2016). Extant research suggests that curriculum and literacy skills are important for SWDs (Gay, 2000). There needs to be a focus on curriculum for SWDs to improve their literacy skills (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). The teachers must learn to accommodate the curriculum to meet the student's needs while keeping the student on grade level. The President's Commission on

Excellence in Special Education (2002) findings are important for outlining ways to improve the academic performance of SWDs.

### **Exosystem**

External factors, such as educational policy, are key drivers within the exosystem (Neal & Neal, 2013) that impact SWDs. Specifically, educational policy affects the school culture, teachers, and curriculum.

### ***Educational Policy***

Educational policies are outgrowths of educational reforms as a means to enact the reforms or be accountable to the reforms. A key educational policy, Common Core State Standards (CCSS), emerging as an outcome from NCLB (2002), impacts SWDs' classroom and educational experiences.

### ***Culturally Responsive Teaching***

In response to NCLB (2002), teachers were expected to adopt a new educational policy: CCSS. However, CCSS can act as a barrier to culturally responsive teaching as incorporating the standards within culturally responsive lessons while still learning how to unbundle CCSS can act as a barrier for teachers in creating effective lessons. An often-recognized negative school culture is the racial and ethnic disparities in SLD identification and achievement (Blazer, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, work from the field of multicultural education (Gay, 2000) indicates that culturally responsive teaching can address diversity within the classroom to enhance a positive school culture. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as incorporating diverse cultures into learning experiences for learning to be relatable to all students in the classroom (Gay, 2000), including students who have disabilities. Culturally responsive teaching has improved academically for African-American students (Lee, 1998; Meijer & Foster,

1989; Moses & Cobb, 2001). As research from Fiedler et al. (2008) indicated, culturally responsive teaching is only one step toward closing the achievement gap. Fiedler et al. (2008) created the “Checklist to Address Disproportionality in Special Education” (p. 53) to limit the over-representation of special education students in schools. This checklist was a rubric that teachers could use before referring a child for special education services. Culturally responsive teaching enables teachers to have the ability to incorporate information about different deficits to acknowledge SWDs in their lessons. Additionally, studies indicate academic improvement for SWDs when teachers use culturally responsive lessons or practices (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Multiple studies have shown that culturally responsive teaching impacts student achievement (Cartledge et al., 2015; Gay, 2000; Griner & Stewart, 2013); however, few studies have shown the academic impact on SWD, indicating more research is warranted.

One mixed-method study examining culturally responsive teaching and reading achievement examined the impact of culturally responsive reading passages on eight second graders with reading or special education risk (Cartledge et al., 2015). The authors compared nine culturally responsive passages to nine non-responsive passages. The culturally responsive passages were chosen based on the student’s interests and reflected African-American families. The non-culturally responsive passages were chosen from a curriculum-based program. Students could recall information, identify the main idea, and make minor reading errors with the culturally responsive passages compared to the non-culturally responsive passages. Based on the findings from this small study, culturally responsive teaching can impact reading skills. The findings also indicate that students with reading or special education risk can benefit from culturally responsive lessons. Replicating this study with a larger sample size of SWDs might provide additional insight into how culturally responsive lessons improve reading skills.

### *Common Core State Standards*

CCSS, developed in 2009, is an outgrowth of educational reforms to ensure that children are college-ready and have the skills they need to be successful from elementary school through high school (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Grounded in the regulation guidelines IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002) provide, schools must keep SWDs on the same grade-level standards for high-stakes testing and classwork assignments. However, research shows that there is difficulty with aligning CCSS with a student's IEP and applying academic skills to SWDs. Murphy and Haller (2015) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 13 special education teachers and graduate students from St. John's University in New York to examine teachers' perceptions of the new CCSS and experiences when applying it to instructional lessons for SWD. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 40, with classroom experience ranging from 1 year to 20 years. The participants' responses indicated they did not feel comfortable incorporating CCSS and preferred precise directions on how to incorporate CCSS. The findings indicated that CCSS remained a struggle for teachers to implement for SWDs because there were no clear directions on how to align CCSS or enough time to implement these standards for SWDs successfully (Murphy & Haller, 2015). Teachers still require professional development on strategies and effective practices of implementing CCSS in instruction to accommodate SWD's needs. Blank and Smithson (2014) examined the effect of the "opportunity to learn analysis" (p. 20) for SWDs. Findings showed that more alignment to state common core standards and classroom instruction resulted in better achievement for SWDs (Murphy & Haller, 2015).

### ***Teacher's Knowledge of Special Education Law***

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), 62.5% of SWDs spend 80% or more time in a general classroom. By law, teachers must accommodate or modify lessons based on the students' needs as stated in their IEP. With SWDs spending more time in the general education setting, most teachers will teach at least one SWD in their class or identify a student for special education services. Most legal knowledge teachers receive regarding special education law is from their colleagues or principals (Schimmel & Militello, 2007).

Schimmel and Militello (2007) examined teachers' knowledge of special education law. Their qualitative research examined teachers' knowledge of students' educational rights by surveying K–12 ( $N = 1,317$ ) special education teachers across the United States. The study's findings highlight the mismatch between teachers' perceptions and knowledge of special education law. Over 50% of the participants lacked knowledge about special education law. Additionally, 60 % of the participants perceived that they knew about students' rights, but the same 60% answered questions incorrectly. Some common error responses included knowledge of students' rights to a lawyer for suspensions longer than 5 days, students promoting their religious or political beliefs, and the school's liability for educational malpractice. Therefore, the researchers recommend that schools be aware of their teachers' knowledge of educational law before they enter the classroom to provide teachers with appropriate training (Schimmel & Militello, 2007).

Similarly, O'Connor et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-method study to determine public school teacher's ( $N = 58$ ) knowledge of IDEA (2004) by asking participants to complete a three-part survey. Each survey component consisted of questions about IDEA and their training to obtain that knowledge. The study's findings suggested that teachers lack essential information

that they need to know about IDEA, such as the “main provisions/benefits of the special education laws” or the “basics of 504” (O’Connor et al., 2016, p. 16), especially because inclusion classes are mandatory. Participants indicated that knowledge of IDEA (2004) would better inform them on how to meet the needs of SWDs or accommodate classwork to prepare students for high-stakes testing (O’Connor et al., 2016).

Teachers who are more knowledgeable of IDEA (2004) can collaborate and build relationships with families with SWDs to create and implement IEPs. With teachers’ knowledge of IDEA and IEPs, they can collaborate with parents by gathering input from parents to better tend to the child’s specific needs (Chen & Gregory, 2011). Also, Fish (2006, 2008) and Love et al. (2017) showed that teachers made the most decisions and had the most input in IEP meetings, making it seem like parents have not participated. This opportunity is for teachers to form relationships by encouraging parents to add their input and acknowledging their input in the decision-making process of the IEPs.

### **Mesosystem**

Indirect interactions that impact the student include mesosystem level factors and individual knowledge that influence that student’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parent-and-teacher relationships and teacher-and-parent knowledge of IEPs are important for student progress.

IDEA (2004) allows parents to make decisions involving their child’s education, and it covers the needs of SWDs until they are the age of 21. For example, parents work collaboratively with teachers to determine appropriate services in the child’s IEP (IDEA, 2004). To create an IEP, the parent, the special education teacher, the general education teachers, and other specialists are all involved. Parents play an important role in adding input to the IEP because



they are more familiar with their child's strengths and weaknesses than the school-based team (Ilik & Er, 2019). Creating an IEP allows teachers and parents to work collaboratively. This indirect interaction within the mesosystem level between parent and teacher develops a child through the collaboration between home and school. Although it is imperative for parents to be active participants involved in creating an IEP, all parents do not know the IEP process (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Ilik & Er, 2019)

Ilik and Er (2019) conducted a qualitative study with 22 teachers and 25 parents in Konya, Turkey. The purpose of the study was to gather the opinions of parents and teachers on the implementation progress of the IEP. Teachers were selected for participation if they worked in a private or state special education school. Parents with a child with a disability were chosen if they volunteered to partake in the study. Data was collected using 20-minute interviews, and responses were coded based on similarities. Findings showed that 76% of the parents were misinformed about IEPs and thought of the IEP as just another document sent home by the school. In comparison, 25% considered an IEP a document to help students improve academically.

Furthermore, only 12% of parents indicated they were invited to IEP meetings, and 88% mentioned they were not invited to the IEP meetings. Nevertheless, 80% of the parents mentioned they tried to participate in creating the IEP. Parents made statements such as "I think it is unsuitable to interfere, teachers know better" (Ilik & Er, 2019, p. 79). Overall, most of the parents' opinions were negative due to minimal knowledge of creating and implementing an IEP for their child. It is the teacher's responsibility to involve the parents and provide guidance before and during IEP meetings so that parents feel comfortable and involved in providing academic support for their child (Ilik & Er, 2019). This study was an international study. There

may be some cultural, educational, or other differences in the IEP process in Turkey compared to the U.S. that might render the results less generalizable to American education, students, and parents.

In addition to parents reporting a lack of involvement in creating IEPs, another factor influencing parent involvement in the IEP process is their knowledge of special education terminology and mandated laws. Rosas and Winterman (2014) examined if IEP and special education documentation were readable and understandable for parents. The study examined the 50 U.S. Department of Education websites' special education manuals readability level in the context of adult literacy. IEPs and special education manuals readability was measured using Fry's (2002) Readability Index. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) determined adults' literacy levels. The readability of the IEPs and special education manuals was compared to the adult literacy levels to identify the relationship. Findings showed that adults were performing on an intermediate literacy level and could access document literacy.

The intermediate literacy level is assigned to "those individuals who can perform moderately challenging literacy skills" (Rosas & Winterman, 2014, p. 30). Document literacy indicates the individual can "locate and use information which are often required when completing forms such as job application and utilizing charts such transportation schedules" (Rosas & Winterman, 2014, p. 30). However, IEPs and special education manuals provided by the state education departments require the readers to have "complex literacy skills" (Rosas & Winterman, 2014, p. 30). More than half of the parent participants had difficulty reading and understanding IEPs and special education manuals, making it difficult for parents to actively participate in IEP meetings (Rosas & Winterman, 2014).

Adding to Ilik and Er's (2019) and Rosas and Winterman's (2014) findings about parent involvement with the IEP process, Underwood (2010) also had similar outcomes regarding parent engagement. Underwood (2010) performed a mixed-method study to identify different engagement and involvement practices that schools use to engage parents with SWDs within the IEP process. The study included 11 all-inclusive elementary schools with 31 Canadian families with SWDs. Families consisted of single parents, co-parents, foster parents, and step-parents. Interviews with parents using Engel's (1993) origin myths narrative technique provided the study's data. Underwood (2010) defined an origin myth as parents' depiction of their first encounter with their child's school and ongoing experiences with the school regarding their participation in their child's IEP implementation. During the interview, families were asked four specific questions:

(1) what was their first encounter with the school, (2) how would they describe of their child, (3) how would you explain your child's IEP and how it was created, and (4) can they identify any collaborative experiences with either the child's teacher or administration? (Underwood, 2010, p. 23)

Along with those specific questions, families answered demographic questions and six questions focusing on parent involvement, satisfaction with the IEP involvement, and the child's progress because of the child's IEP. Findings showed that 18 families were actively involved with the IEP development for their SWDs, and 13 families were slightly involved or not involved with the development of the IEP. Families that were actively involved in the IEP progress were also volunteers in the school, questioned the level of student support, had prior knowledge of IEPs and the process, and were actively involved both at school and home. The families not actively involved with the IEP process also did not feel their students had improved

academically. All families agreed about having strong relationships or school involvement with their teachers if their child was progressing. Lastly, families preferred inclusive settings for their SWDs if they observed their students were meeting their IEP academic goals, and parents were open to moving their child out of an inclusive classroom education setting if students were not meeting their IEP academic goals.

### **Microsystem**

The microsystem is the closest system to the developing child within the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this system, teachers can directly influence the child's development. Teacher factors that affect SWDs include teacher self-efficacy (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Markova et al., 2015), teacher perceptions (Markova et al., 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015), and teacher retention (Billingsley, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

#### ***Teacher Self-Efficacy***

Numerous researchers have examined teacher self-efficacy and its role in SWDs (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Markova et al., 2015). Teacher self-efficacy is "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she can affect student performance" (Berman et al., 1977, p. 137). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs affect SWDs' achievement and motivation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). A teacher's self-efficacy can also determine a teacher's readiness to teach SWDs (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The minimal training or fewer years of experience by preservice teachers and new teachers contributes to their negative perceptions of teaching SWD (Markova et al., 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015).

#### ***Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Students With Disabilities***

Additionally, minimal training in teaching SWDs and being a novice teacher contributes to teachers' perception of teaching SWD. Markova et al. (2015) conducted a mixed-method

study with 49 preservice general education teachers. The authors reviewed preservice teachers' implicit attitudes toward students with special educational needs from different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the author investigated preservice teachers' explicit attitudes toward inclusive education. Measures included an evaluative priming task, self-report questionnaires, and subscales from the Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (Wilczenski, 1992). Participants reported a high motivation to act without prejudice toward minorities. However, they held less favorable explicit attitudes toward including students with special education needs, especially students with behavioral problems. The authors also recommended considering how explicit and implicit attitudes develop or change during preservice training and after spending time in the classroom. The authors mentioned that teacher development and teacher personal bias might affect student learning (Avramidis et al., 2000a; Markova et al., 2015).

Burke and Sutherland (2004) also conducted a qualitative study to determine whether a relationship existed between preservice and in-service teachers' experiences with disabled students and their attitudes toward inclusion. Participants ( $N = 60$ ) consisted of preservice teachers who attended Brooklyn College and elementary in-service teachers who worked at a public school in Queens, New York. The study's results indicated that (a) preservice teachers reported stronger background knowledge of disabilities compared to in-service teachers, (b) preservice teachers had a stronger belief about inclusion having positive effects on special education students, (c) preservice teachers felt their programs prepared them to work with disabled students compared to in-service teachers who felt unprepared, (d) preservice teachers were more willing to teach in inclusion classrooms rather than in-service teachers, (e) preservice teachers felt SWDs would benefit more from inclusion classrooms compared to in-service teachers, and (f) preservice teachers believed that they received onsite training to work with

SWDs successfully. Overall, preservice teachers relied solely on what they were learning in their courses to feel prepared to work with students with disabilities. Additionally, in-service teachers wanted more training and preparation to work with SWDs. Within the macrosystem examination of resource allocation, preservice teachers were seen in a negative light due to being less qualified, which can be detrimental to SWDs' achievement. Whereas, within the microsystem, preservice teachers are positively seen because they can improve SWDs' achievement with preparation and confidence.

Burke and Sutherland (2004) and Markova et al. (2015) indicated that teachers' self-efficacy relied on their confidence in teaching SWDs and the amount of training they received, especially from teacher education programs. Preparation improves teachers' confidence in teaching SWDs, improving student academic scores (Jerald, 2007). School leadership providing their teachers with opportunities to observe other peers, giving feedback on teaching, modeling classroom instruction, and reassuring adequate resources to support effective teaching are ways that training impacts students' outcomes (Jerald, 2007). Lastly, teachers who specialized in special education ( $n = 46$ ) had higher self-efficacy than general education teachers ( $n = 24$ ; Nuri et al., 2017). Nuri et al. (2017) also found that special education teachers who had high self-efficacy also had high self-efficacy regarding student engagement, their ability to implement effective instructional strategies, and their ability to manage classrooms. Teacher efficacy stemming from professional development may be linked to the macrosystem and school resources to provide teachers with the tools and development to improve student achievement.

### ***Teacher Retention***

The achievement gap in reading expands for SWDs when teachers are unqualified, and there is a shortage of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan,

1996). Schools' inability to retain their teachers contributes to the shortage of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004). Teacher retention encompasses more than hiring more teachers yearly but includes having fewer teacher turnover for SWDs. Gersten et al. (2001) conducted a qualitative study of special education teachers ( $N = 887$ ) from three urban schools in the western United States. The researchers used the Working in Special Education Survey by Morvant et al. (1992) to determine factors contributing to special education attrition and retention in public schools. The survey consisted of eight components: (a) support from principals/teachers, (b) central office support, (c) professional development opportunities, (d) role dissonance, (e) stress due to job design, (f) satisfaction, (g) commitment to the profession, and (h) years of special education teaching experience. Gersten et al. (2001) indicated that teachers stayed at schools if provided with strategies to reduce stress and continuous professional development.

Despite the amount of teaching experience, novice and veteran teachers indicated their desire to engage in continuous professional development throughout the school year (Gersten et al., 2001). Teachers reported leaving a school based on their autonomy with decision-making within their classroom and job expectations (i.e., the mismatch between teacher expectations and duties, such as teachers spending more time overloaded with paperwork or IEP meetings). Regarding attrition, teachers reported leaving based on stress related to the job, role dissonance, lack of professional development opportunities, and support from principals and other teachers. Special education teachers report that continuous professional development, support in managing the required work, and a warm school culture that supports their teachers will help with retention (Gersten et al., 2001).

Similarly, Cancio et al. (2013) also conducted a qualitative study to determine factors contributing to teachers continuing to work with students with emotional and behavioral

disorders. Participants ( $N = 391$ ) from the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders completed an email survey. Just like Gersten et al. (2001), Cancio et al. (2013) presented six components: (a) extent of administrative support, (b) satisfaction with various aspects of the job, (c) feelings experienced concerning the job, (d) views about the school, (e) self-descriptive statements, and (f) demographic information. Findings indicated that teachers wanted to build trust and form supportive relationships with leadership to grow as teachers (Cancio et al., 2013). The more support teachers receive from the administration, the more they are willing to stay in the field. Support includes feedback, trusting relationships (Cancio et al., 2013), and professional development for the special education teacher to remain in the field (Cancio et al., 2013; Gersten et al., 2001).

Additionally, Hagaman and Casey (2017) researched why preservice special education teachers leave the field of education, the roles and expectations of the preservice special education teacher, and the support given to these teachers to succeed within their first years. The 52 participants from two universities in the Midwest were categorized into three categories: preservice teachers, special education teachers teaching for at least 3 years, and principals responsible for hiring special education teachers from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade settings. Each participant attended a focus group that provided participants with statistics about special education turnover in schools and an open forum for questions and discussion. Hagaman and Casey applied the Nominal Group Technique procedure adopted by Delbecq et al. (1975) to lead the focus group with six steps. Results indicated that preservice teachers and new special education teachers believed that teachers left the field because of stress due to huge caseloads and lack of support. All three categories of educators indicated that the expectations for special education teachers consist of “lesson planning and teaching” and “behavior management”

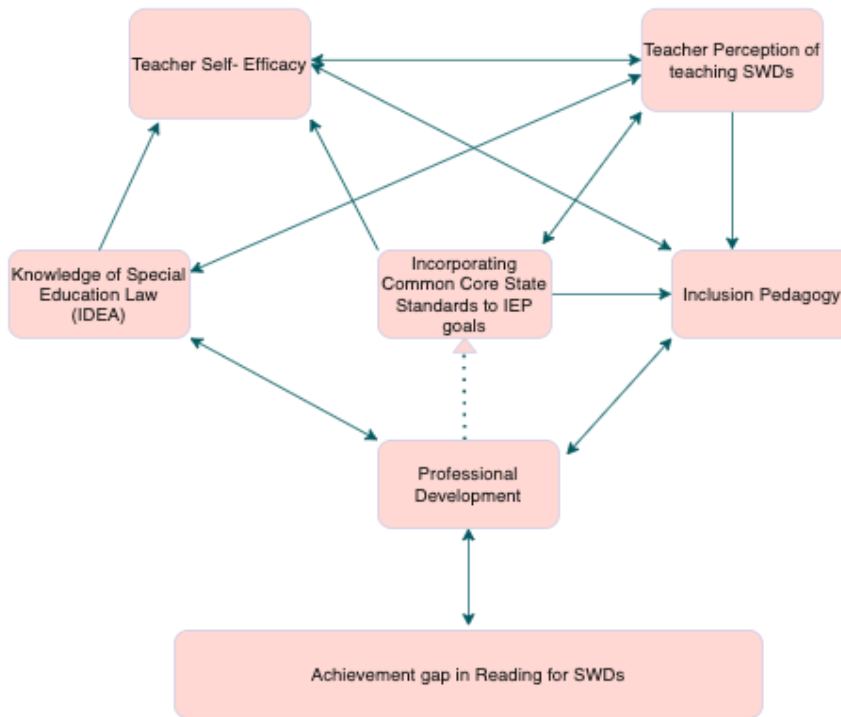


(Hagaman & Casey, 2017, p. 285). Lastly, preservice special education teachers, new special education teachers, and administrators mentioned that the support that new special education teachers need is mentorship and training to teach SWDs (Hagaman & Casey, 2017). The researchers found common themes among the three categories of staff members that contributed to special education attrition.

All three studies similarly found stress as a main factor that results in teachers leaving the field of special education or the school (Cancio et al., 2013; Gersten et al., 2001; Hagaman & Casey, 2017). All researchers wanted continuous professional development to develop and train teachers. Teachers in all studies indicated that support from the administration is a major determining factor in staying at a school. Cancio et al. (2013) and Hagaman and Casey (2017) presented the commonality of teacher appreciation as a factor for teacher retention.

**Figure 2**

*Achievement Gap*



Teacher self-efficacy and teacher perception of teaching SWDs are likely influenced by the teachers’ knowledge of special education law, the ability to align CCSS to IEP goals, and inclusion pedagogy (see Figure 2). The needed skills, attitudes, and knowledge require professional development—inquiry into these gaps between what they know versus what they know after training.

**Summary**

Many factors contribute to the achievement gap in reading for SWDs. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provided a theoretical framework to examine the factors that impacted the achievement gap for reading with SWDs. Federal special education laws

specifically impacted SWDs by providing guidelines that address accessibility (EACHA, 1975; NCLB, 2002), inclusion (NCLB, 2002), and accountability (NCLB, 2002) for academic progress for all students. Factors involving resource allocation, such as teacher qualification and per-pupil expenditure (Hanushek, 2016), highlight the importance of the education supply and demand chain stemming from federal education reform laws (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Jacob, 2007). This supply and demand chain influences hiring and retaining qualified teachers (Fideler et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2003) and positively impacts reading achievement outcomes for SWDs (Burke & Sutherland, 2004).

Educational policy has created a misalignment among instructional practice (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), curriculum (Gay, 2000), and educator implementation of the IEP. The lack of parent and teacher collaboration in creating and implementing the IEP (Ilik & Er, 2019; Rosas & Winterman, 2014; Underwood, 2010) hinders SWDs' academic outcomes. Lastly, teachers' self-efficacy for SWDs (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), their perceptions of teaching SWDs (Markova et al., 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015), and teacher retention (Billingsley, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996) are key factors influencing the reading achievement with SWDs.

## Chapter 2

### Needs Assessment Study Method and Initial Findings

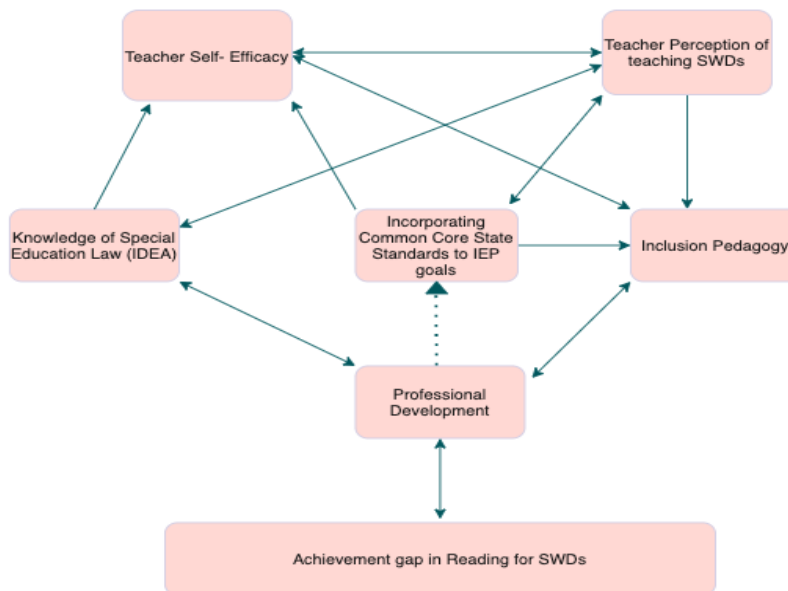
Students with disabilities (SWD) in Grades K to 12 have lower reading achievement scores than their non-disabled peers (OSSE, 2019). This needs assessment explored factors contributing to this achievement gap in four broad categories: fourth- through eighth-grade teacher's self-efficacy, teacher perception of SWDs, teacher knowledge of special education laws, and teachers' instructional practice in applying their ability to reduce the reading achievement gap. The conceptual framework derived from the Chapter 1 review of the literature (see Figure 1) depicts the reciprocal interaction of teacher self-efficacy and perception of teaching SWDs (Markova et al., 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015) as contributing to and being influenced by their knowledge of special education laws (Schimmel & Militello, 2007), CCSS and IEP requirements (Beutel & Tangen, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016), and skills needed to address inclusion in their classrooms proactively.

In Nuri et al.'s (2017) study, special education teachers had a higher self-efficacy for teaching SWDs than general education teachers. In combination with self-efficacy for teaching SWDs are teachers' attitudes toward teaching SWDs. Teachers' attitudes are positive if they have experience working with SWDs or took university courses before teaching SWDs, specifically preservice teachers (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Markova et al., 2015). Preservice teachers had more positive attitudes toward teaching SWDs if supported by administration and professional development. Learning more about the role that professional development plays in developing the knowledge and skills teachers need to improve the reading achievement of SWDs is needed (Leko & Brownell, 2009). Research to learn more about professional development for teachers

serving special education students indicates that teachers want-continuous professional development support (Cancio et al., 2013; Gersten et al., 2001; Hagaman & Casey, 2017).

**Figure 3**

*Chapter 1 Conceptual Framework*



**Description of Problem of Practice in Context**

The research context for the study is ABC Charter School (pseudonym), whose mission is to “empower students for lifelong success by building strong character, promoting academic excellence, and generating public service throughout Washington D.C.” (ABC Charter School, 2019, para. 2). The charter school consists of 250 students from grades prek–3 through eighth grade. The population is composed of 92% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 1% White students. Approximately 7% of students are identified as a student with a disability, and 54% are at risk of failing academically (ABC Charter School Report Card, 2019). The special education department is composed of five special educators and two interventionists who provide push-in and pullout services for 10 students weekly. Special education teachers co-teach with general

education teachers in the core subject of reading or math. Interventionists work on foundational skills that students need to close academic gaps. As a special education inclusion teacher for a Southeast Washington, DC charter school, this researcher worked closely with one general education co-teacher to ensure that every child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) in Grades 5 and 6 complied with state standards. In this role as an inclusion teacher, the responsibilities included ensuring that a student's instructional hours, accommodations, and related services were met according to their IEPs, as well as attending annual meetings to update and review a student's IEP to align with the CCSS for their current grade level. All students were enrolled in two periods of reading and math, one period of health and science, and one elective class daily.

As of 2004, the amended IDEA mandated that SWDs must be in the least restrictive environment to ensure every child gets free and appropriate public education. For this dissertation's purposes, the least restrictive environment means that disabled students are being taught alongside their non-disabled peers in an inclusion setting (e.g., regular education classroom; IDEA, 2004). Although SWDs are in inclusion classrooms, they are still required to receive all services and accommodations (e.g., occupational therapy, speech therapy, extended time, and read-alouds) stated in their IEPs. Along with the mandated law (IDEA, 2004), NCLB (2002) required schools to try to help students achieve proficiency on high-stakes testing in core subjects of English language arts and math (20 U.S.C. §6301). Special and general education teachers are held accountable to comply with the inclusion of SWDs in high-stakes testing, reflecting knowledge and skills aligned with the general education curriculum. Teacher accountability has propelled most public schools toward an inclusion model (Zigmond et al.,

2009). Despite the use of inclusion models, the research context has similar challenges to those expressed above.

### **Method**

The purpose of the needs assessment was to identify any differences between general education and special education teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, attitudes, and skills related to teaching students with SLDs. Additionally, this researcher explored the relationships between special education and general education teachers' self-efficacy, attitudes, and knowledge of special education laws and skills. The needs assessment also assessed special education and general education teachers' perceptions of current staff development programs that improve SWD education. A mixed-method methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative research provided a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions through survey and open-ended questions.

The research questions (RQ) that guided the needs assessment were the following:

RQ1: What is the difference between general education and special education teacher's teacher self-efficacy in teaching students with IEPs?

RQ1a: What difference is there between general education and special education teacher's teacher self-efficacy in teaching students reading to students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities?

RQ2: What attitudes do general education teachers and special education teachers have about students with IEPs?

RQ2a: What challenges do general education teachers see/have with teaching students under the classification specific learning disability?

RQ3: What are special education and general education teachers' perceptions of current staff development programs for teaching students with disabilities?

RQ4: What are general education and special education teachers' knowledge of special education law?

### **Research Design**

I used quantitative and qualitative data to learn more about each research question.

Quantitative data were gathered using Likert scale surveys for all research questions. Research Question 3, which asked participants to describe the nature of professional development in their school context, employed short response answers. The survey consisted of 60 questions, making it likely that seeking follow-up qualitative data would be overly tedious for the participants. As such, one limitation of this study may be the lack of triangulated data due to the focus on Likert-scale responses. Another limitation was participation bias because teachers responded to the surveys based on the results they thought I would like to see as a special educator. However, I did gather qualitative data for Research Question 3 to seek a richer understanding of the participants' context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The target population recruited for the study was special education teachers and general education teachers in a charter school. Approximately 30 teachers within the research context fit the inclusion parameters as general or special education teachers who taught in inclusion settings. There were five special education teachers and 25 general education teachers. Each of these teachers taught inclusion classes with at least one student under the classification of SLD daily. One major limitation of this study was the small sample size, which could have affected the study's validity and generalizability. This researcher could access these potential participants during planning periods, professional development days, or after school to conduct this research.



The fourth- and eighth-grade educator population was appropriate for the problem of practice. Teachers who taught reading content in fourth grade were crucial because students would shift from learning to read to reading to learn in the fourth grade (Chall, 1983). Developmentally, fifth- and sixth-grade teachers build on early literacy skills by developing students' vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies (Chall, 1983). By the seventh and eighth grades, students continue to build on their vocabulary and knowledge by exposure to new readings (Chall, 1983).

### **Measures and Instrumentation**

I assessed if the target constructs differed between general and special education teachers. To collect primary quantitative and qualitative data measuring teacher self-efficacy, teacher attitudes toward inclusion, knowledge of IEPs, and professional development, this researcher combined validated Likert-scale questionnaires and open-ended questions into one online survey called Special Education Qualtrics.

The first factor explored teacher self-efficacy and was assessed in RQ1. To examine teacher self-efficacy, I used an adapted 16-item Likert survey from Solomon and Scott (2013), which focused on educators' efficacy perceptions about teaching SWDs. RQ2 addressed teachers' attitudes toward teaching SWDs and was the second factor examined. The Teaching SWDs Efficacy Scale examined teachers' attitudes toward SWDs. The survey consisted of 16 questions on a 5-point Likert scale. The third factor was professional development, addressed in RQ3. Professional development was measured using Panorama Education's (2015) Professional Learning Survey, which consisted of eight survey questions on a 5-point Likert scale and four short-response questions describing their current staff development programs for teaching SWDs. These responses provided a qualitative measure of participants' personal opinions and acknowledgment of current professional development efforts in the school context. The final

factor was teachers' knowledge of IEPs. This factor was addressed in RQ4, as teachers' knowledge of IEPs was measured using a survey created by O'Connor et al. (2016) consisting of 10 true and false questions focused on IEP and 504 plan implementation. Table 1 contains sample questions from each of the instrumentation tools used.

**Table 1**

*Special Education Survey*

Variable	Definition	Sample questions	Measurements
Teacher Self-Efficacy	“The extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance” (Berman et al., 1977, p. 137)	Instruction <i>I can adapt the curriculum to help meet the needs of a student with disabilities in my classroom</i>	5-point Likert-type (no confidence at all (1) to complete confidence (5))
Teacher’s attitude toward teaching students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms	The thoughts teachers have about teaching students with disabilities and how it influences student achievement.	Opinions Relative to Integration of Students with Disabilities <i>Most or all regular classrooms can be modified to meet the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities.</i>	7-point Likert scale, 14 questions
Knowledge of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)	Teacher’s understanding of special education law in the classroom setting to utilize IEPs for classroom instruction in Reading	<i>The child’s IEP is reviewed by the IEP team at least once a year, or more often if the parents or school make such a request.</i>	10 questions, true or false survey-
Professional Development	Continuous training and learning opportunities of strategies and techniques to support students with specific learning disability in inclusion classrooms.	Panorama’s Professional Learning Survey <i>At your school, how valuable are the available professional development opportunities for special education?</i>	8 questions, 5- point Likert scale

**Data Collection Methods**

Participants received the letter of consent through an email. The consent letter consisted of the purpose, the study’s components, requirements, and assurance of the participants’ confidentiality. The body of the email restated the study’s goal and the survey completion deadline. Data were collected through an online survey using Qualtrics. The survey was sent to

30 inclusion teachers with a 43% response rate. Participants received two identical recruitment emails from the researcher and a follow-up email recruitment email from the special education coordinator. Participants submitted nine complete surveys and four incomplete surveys. Participants 8, 13, and 11 completed approximately 25%, 50%, and 75% of the survey, respectively. Participant 9 completed only the demographic items of the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data. Because of the lack of qualitative data collected, no coding procedure was needed, but participants' responses were noted and compared to their corresponding quantitative responses.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Research Question 1**

Teacher's self-efficacy in teaching SWDs was the focus of RQ1: What is the difference between general education and special education teacher's teacher self-efficacy in teaching students with IEPs? Survey responses indicated that most participants expressed firm self-efficacy beliefs. All participants' mean scores ( $M = 4.5$ ) fell in the "completely confident" category on the Likert-scale. In Table 1, the observed scores indicated that participants felt "completely confident" with teaching SWDs. The four special education teachers' mean scores were 4.5, and the eight general education teachers' mean scores were 4.5. Both fell in the "completely confident" category on the Likert scale and had the same mean, indicating that special education teachers and general education teachers in this context expressed similar self-efficacy for teaching students with IEPs.

#### **Table 2**

*Self-Efficacy for Special Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-efficacy	4	4.00	4.94	4.5	.3

**Table 3**

*Self-Efficacy for General Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-efficacy	8	3.31	5.00	4.5	.5

**Research Question 2**

Teachers' attitudes toward teaching SWDs are the focus of Research Question 2. Two research questions helped examine this factor: (2) What attitudes do general and special education teachers have about students with IEPs? and (2a) What challenges do general education teachers see/have with teaching students under the classification of specific learning disability? Survey outcomes resulted in an overall mean score of ( $M = 3.82$ ) for all 11 participants (see Table 4). Eleven participants indicated they were *somewhat* comfortable integrating SWDs into their classes. Participants' mean scores fell between the *somewhat agree* and approaching the *neither agree nor disagree* on the Likert scale.

**Table 4***Integration of Special Education in Inclusion Classrooms*

Survey questions	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
ISD1_Educated_Regclassroom	11	1.00	6.00	3.0	1.4
ISD2_RemoveSWD_Regclassroom	11	2.00	6.00	4.0	1.4
ISD3_Separateclassroom_Eliminated	11	2.00	7.00	5.0	1.6
ISD4_Regclass_Modified_SWD	11	2.00	6.00	3.0	1.1
ISD5_SLD_Regclassroom	11	2.00	5.00	3.3	1.1
ISD6_Inclusion_Efficientmodel	11	1.00	6.00	3.3	1.5
ISD7_Toomuchtime	11	3.00	7.00	5.6	1.2
ISD8_Lackacademiskills	11	2.00	7.00	5.2	1.9
ISD9_Lacksocialskills	11	2.00	7.00	5.6	1.8
ISD10_Genedteacher_nosuccess	11	1.00	7.00	5.2	2.0
ISD11_Teamteach_Meetneeds_SWD	11	1.00	7.00	2.9	1.9
ISD12_Coteaching	11	1.00	7.00	2.3	1.9
ISD13_Sharedresponsibility_SWD	11	1.00	5.00	2.1	1.5
ISD14_Consultantteachmodel	11	1.00	4.00	2.6	1.3

Eight general educators had a mean score of 3.7, and three special educators had a mean score of 4.0 (illustrated in Tables 5 and 6). Special educators had a 0.26 difference in mean, showing that they may be more likely to integrate SWDs in their classes. Participants scored mostly *strongly disagreed* and *disagreed* on the Likert scale for statements about SWDs requiring too much of the teacher’s time, having doubts about SWDs’ academic capabilities, and doubting their social skills. Despite all participants receiving the complete survey, low participation occurred with the open-ended responses, making it impossible to examine educators’ qualitative perceptions. Interestingly, only one participant completed the open-ended questions on the survey. Qualitatively, the participant’s responses showed they had challenges with teaching SWDs. Even though Participant 1 achieved a mean score of 4.6, which is 0.1 points higher than the sample mean, the participant stated having challenges with “students not able to focus to complete given tasks even with breaks. Students are still struggling with differentiated work.”

**Table 5***Integration of Special Education in Inclusion Classrooms for General Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional development	8	2.79	4.64	3.7	.62

**Table 6***Integration of Special Education in Inclusion Classrooms for Special Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional development	3	3.50	4.93	4.0	.78

**Research Question 3**

RQ3 was the following: What are special education and general education teachers' perceptions regarding current staff development programs provided for teaching students with disabilities? Of the eight participants who completed the survey, the mean score was 3.2 (as shown in Table 7). Most participants fell in the *quite supportive* or *extremely supportive* category on the Likert scale for the statements: "Overall, how supportive has the school been of your growth as a teacher?" and "How often do your professional development opportunities help you explore new ideas pertaining to special education?"

**Table 7***Professional Development Overall Mean*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional development	8	2.25	4.50	3.2	.69

Table 8 illustrates the five general education teachers who completed the survey with a mean score 3.30. Table 9 shows data from three special education teachers with a mean score of 3.20. General education teachers achieved a mean score 0.10 higher than the mean score for

special education teachers. Qualitatively, Participant 1 stated that professional developments that helped teach SWDs were “learning about the IEP process and reading IEPs.” In addition, Participant 1 stated that beneficial professional development to help teachers teaching SWDs would be “having concrete examples of supports.”

**Table 8**

*Professional Development for General Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional development	5	2.75	4.50	3.3	.69

**Table 9**

*Professional Development for Special Education Teachers*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional development	3	2.25	3.88	3.2	.85

**Research Question 4**

RQ4 was the following: What are general education and special education teachers’ knowledge of special education law? Nine out of the 13 participants completed this portion of the survey. None of the nine participants scored 100% on this survey (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Teachers’ Knowledge of Special Education Law*

Participant	Score
1	60%
2	70%
3	80%
4	70%
5	Not done
6	60%
7	50%
8	Not done
9	Not done
10	70%
11	30%

Participant	Score
12	50%
13	Not done

Scores ranged from 30% being the lowest and 80% being the highest (as illustrated in Table 10). The researcher noted common misconceptions with Questions 42, 44, and 45. Question 42 stated, “IDEA requires that specific learning disability determination takes into account the qualification of the teacher providing instruction within the educational setting.” For Question 42, participants mostly chose false, indicating that teachers did not believe their instruction qualifications were considered for a child to be classified under an SLD. Question 44 stated, “According to IDEA, a 3-year re-evaluation is not required if the parent and local educational agency deem it unnecessary.” For Question 44, most teachers believe that 3-year re-evaluations are mandatory regardless of the parent’s and local educational agency's decision. Question 45 stated, “IDEA requires that observations of students be conducted by the student’s current teacher.” On Question 45, teachers believed that observation could only be from the current teacher, but observations can be from prior teachers and related service providers.

**Table 11**

*Mean Scores for Teachers’ Knowledge of Special Education Law*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>
Knowledge of special education law	9	30	80	60

**Conclusions and Future Study**

The Special Education Qualtrics survey findings revealed that participants want professional development centered around concrete examples of supporting SWDs, especially during disruptive behaviors such as tantrums. Data also revealed that participants lacked information about special education law around IEPs and IDEA (2004). These findings indicate



that an intervention addressing special education law and implementing support for SWDs in an inclusion setting is needed. Comments to the survey, such as Participant 1 stating that a beneficial professional development to help teachers with SWDs would be “having concrete examples of support,” provide insights into the type of professional learning that may benefit inclusion teachers in their work with SWDs.

Additionally, five participants ranked being able to control tantrums within the classroom as somewhat confident, slightly confident, or not confident at all, indicating that managing student behaviors may be challenging. Providing special education and general education teachers with professional development about special education law and supporting SWDs can address the teachers' needs to support SWDs better. However, there was a job change because the needs assessment data were collected. Rather than implementing professional development for the new teachers, getting the perspectives from those teachers would be needed to create an intervention that aligned with their needs.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Empirical Project Research Design**

Due to NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) mandates, teachers are pressured to close the achievement gap experienced by SWDs and learn inclusive pedagogical strategies to accommodate SWDs within the classroom setting. Findings from the needs assessment indicated that, although there is a strong need to reduce the achievement gap for SWDs, inclusion teachers from ABC Charter School feel unprepared for the challenges of the job (Williams, 2020). Given that the researcher began working at another school during the course of this research, it was determined that an additional needs assessment was necessary to determine what the participants at the new school, DEF Prep (pseudonym), felt or knew about education law, IEPs, inclusive pedagogy, and SLD. Thus, focus groups and interviews with teachers in at DEF Prep were conducted, allowing teachers the opportunity to share their experiences, opinions, and perspectives on these topics, rather than giving teachers an intervention that does not apply to their needs. Data from these focus groups were used to determine the best way to intervene within this context to support teachers of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. This chapter describes the context, purpose, research design, and data analysis of focus groups in the new context.

#### **Context of the Study**

The context for this study was a charter school in Washington, DC. The school, DEF Prep, was founded in 2008, its population consist of roughly 140 students from Grades 4 through 6. Of those 140 students, 98% identify as African American (DEF Prep, n.d.). There are eight special educators, 12 general education teachers, and 21 inclusion teachers.

## **Positionality**

As a special education teacher of 8 years moving into a leadership role as an academic specialist, my role at DEF Prep involves conducting evaluations with each teacher to ensure that every student receives IEP-mandated accommodations and modifications. My role also includes supporting inclusion teachers with creating lessons, checking for fidelity, and offering other support as requested by teachers. The nature and extent of my role in supervising and supporting teachers may have impacted how participants responded. Participants may respond differently based on what they think the researcher may want to hear (Rabe, 2003), fear of what is being said getting back to leadership (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), and feeling of intimidation because of a lack of knowledge of specific topics (Ransome, 2013).

## **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to learn about inclusion teachers' (a) knowledge of the IEP process, (b) experiences teaching within an inclusive classroom setting, (c) perceptions of any student benefits and challenges with learning within inclusion classrooms, and (d) student support needs to teach within their inclusion classrooms more effectively. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of inclusion teachers regarding teaching students with a specific learning disability within an inclusion classroom setting?
2. What are inclusion teachers' knowledge of and experience with specific learning disability?
3. What knowledge and experience do inclusion teachers have with IEPs?
  - a. How do inclusion teachers perceive their role within the IEP process?

4. What supports do inclusion teachers want and/or need to effectively teach students with specific learning disabilities?

### **Research Design**

I employed a qualitative design to answer each of the research questions. Qualitative research was used to enable a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and points-of-view. Researcher-led focus group discussions around the three main topics—inclusive pedagogy, IEPs, and SLDs—were held. Each focus group offered participants an opportunity to discuss their experiences and perspectives on the common topic of special education with other participants who may also have the same views (Teherani et al., 2015). Although qualitative data provided insight and a deeper analysis of human experiences (Plano Clark et al., 2008), there were limitations. One limitation of the research design was participation bias because teachers responded to the focus group questions based on the results they thought I would like to hear as a special educator. However, qualitative data from multiple participants were better to seek a richer understanding of the participants' context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Participants**

Study participants included inclusion teachers in Grades 4 through 6 ( $n = 8$ ). Inclusion teachers are general education and special education teachers who teach both non-disabled students and SWDs within the same classroom (Anastasiou et al., 2015; Bui et al., 2010). In the research context, two inclusion teachers per grade level taught general subjects focusing on reading. There were nine homeroom classes: three in Grade 4, three in Grade 5, and three in Grade 6. All participants had at least 1 year of classroom experience. There were eight to 14 participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Participants signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. The consent form provided more information about

the research, the expected duration of the study, the study requirements of interest, the participation benefits and risks, and any costs associated with participation. All participants had voluntarily participated. The names of the participants were not released. Monetary gifts were not received or offered for study participation.

### **Instrumentation**

Focus groups are group discussions where individuals share opinions, experiences, and perspectives on a common topic (Gill et al., 2008). In focus group discussions, questions are asked and responses are recorded so that a researcher can conduct analysis to uncover common threads from the discussion. A semi-structured protocol featuring open-ended questions were used to foster participant conversation through open-ended questions around the research topics of interest yet allow for personal responses explored through follow-up probing questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The focus group interview questions contained information to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Each focus group had six questions based on the topic they chose to discuss. Focus group questions were reviewed by two experts in the field. Focus Group 1: Inclusive Pedagogy included the following questions:

1. How do you perceive the shift to an inclusive classroom?
2. When you hear the word inclusion, what does that look like to you within the classroom?
3. Describe any inclusive strategies you have implemented in your classroom? Why those strategies specifically?
4. How do you think the school leadership can strengthen access to inclusive pedagogy?
5. What are some challenges you have experienced within your inclusive classroom?

6. How many professional learning opportunities around inclusive pedagogy have you had on inclusive pedagogy?

Focus Group 2: Inclusive Pedagogy included the following questions:

1. Describe your understanding of IEPs?
2. Have you ever read an IEP? If so, did you feel you understood it and how to apply to the student?
3. Have you ever attended an IEP meeting? If so, what do you know about the process, what worked and what didn't work? How much input did you have when it comes to implementation of IEPs?
4. What role/responsibility do you have in managing special education issues with your students?
5. What role/responsibility does the special education educator have in managing special education issues with your students?
6. Do you think knowledge of special education law would be helpful to your practice? If so, how?
7. How many professional development opportunities around IEPs have you had?

Focus Group 3: Specific Learning Disability included the following questions:

1. What do you know about specific learning disability? What would you like to know about specific learning disability?
2. Describe any supports or accommodations you have created to help any of your students with disabilities.
3. Is there anything you would like to learn about specific learning disability, the factors that contribute to it, the process, or how it shows up within students?

4. How can the administration team can support you with to have an effective inclusion classroom?
5. Describe how specific learning disability shows up within your classroom.
6. How many professional developments opportunities around specific learning disability have you had?

### **Procedure**

Once approval was given from DEF Prep to conduct focus groups, recruiting teachers was the next step. This section describes the participant selection, the data collection, and data analysis.

#### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through school email in Early February. Early February was chosen because it was 3 weeks after teachers returned from winter break. It allowed teachers to get back within a school rhythm before committing to participating in a focus group. The email provided the purpose of the focus groups and the requirements to participate in the focus groups. To avoid participant coercion, I gave participants the option to choose what focus group they would like to join based on the topics and the option to choose either independent interviews or group focus groups through a scheduling program called Calendly. Participant eligibility criteria included those who were (a) fourth- to sixth-grade inclusion teachers; (b) taught math, reading, or social studies/science; and (c) were employees of this researcher's specific charter school.

#### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected using three focus groups of four to six participants per group. I completed a 60-minute discussion with each group. I asked participants six questions and took notes of the participants' responses. The focus group was held as a discussion amongst

participants on Zoom. A laptop was used to record the focus groups, and an iPad was used to record audio in case there was a technology issue with the laptop recording. Discussions were recorded using Otter.ai, and the discussions were transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of what inclusion teachers know about IDEA (2004) law, inclusive pedagogy, and SLDs. Data were collected through written notes based on participants' responses; the sessions were recorded and transcribed. A direct content analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data from which codes and themes were identified and situated in existing literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Royster et al., 2014). The data from the focus groups and interviews were analyzed through process coding. After conducting all focus groups, an analysis of my written notes using thematic analysis based on the teachers' dialogue was used.

Three focus group transcripts were recorded and transcribed for three cycles of coding. During the first cycle of coding, phrases describing participants' perceptions, experiences, opinions, and beliefs on special education topics, such as (a) law, (b) IEPs, (c) inclusive pedagogy, and (d) SLDs, were identified and coded. Specifically, the researcher looked for phrases related to each participant's experience with the topic, their challenges, the support they indicated they needed to feel successful, and their knowledge of the topic. To narrow the codes, the researcher looked for the most appropriate phrases aligned with the researcher's thought process and started grouping the phrases. Repeated codes were eliminated or merged to narrow the codes further. For example, phrases like "lack of training" or "more support from leaders" were eliminated or merged due to repetition or similar meanings. Finally, themes were created during the third and last coding rounds.



The notes from the open-ended questions in the focus groups and interviews were analyzed through in-vivo coding. In-vivo coding would be used for the reflective open-ended questions. Codes were formed from the participant’s answers. Codes were checked with a peer to confirm the accuracy and validity of the codes. After the first initial coding of phrases, the researcher pulled out any repetitive phrases through emergent coding that might have been recorded to identify any patterns.

In-vivo coding uses specific words and phrases from the participants, and emergent coding is used to identify common themes within the data (Creswell, 2013). In-vivo coding is beneficial because it allows us to interpret what was said by participants exactly (Miles et al., 2014). In-vivo codes were used to create the codes for the codebook (see Appendices E to G). Emergent coding is beneficial for finding common themes and making relationships and connections between them (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Thematic analysis was used to find patterns within the codes. The first coding cycle started with coding phrases used by participants (see Table 12). Then, the second cycle identified themes based on the codes from the phrases (see Table 13).

**Table 12**

*First Cycle of Coding*

IEPs	Specific learning disability	Inclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don’t really have a big understanding of IEP</li> <li>• I know what it is and know that when looking at IEP reading one you can see like the accomplishments the student has or goals that they’re working toward</li> <li>• Based on their evaluation, they need specific additional accommodations to meet certain meet certain goals</li> <li>• Execute on whatever goals they fidelity is that have in my content area when they’re in my classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don’t know anything about it</li> <li>• I am willing to like learn anything that I can</li> <li>• There is soo much that I still don’t know about learning disabilities</li> <li>• I haven’t had the extensive training, or you know had the knowledge to even know what the differences are</li> <li>• The kids that I know have specific learning disability like the trouble of like focusing, and like following directions and it’s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IEP not fully reflecting the needs or social emotional behaviors</li> <li>• Parent engagement</li> <li>• Lacking experience with disabilities</li> <li>• No professional development around inclusive pedagogy</li> <li>• Parents not fully understanding an IEP</li> <li>• There has to be a heavy dose of training when it comes to inclusion. And</li> </ul>

IEPs	Specific learning disability	Inclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodate with so that they're understanding the material so they are able to like do it by themselves</li> <li>• To do my best to support that and support the implementation but like transparently in my classroom</li> <li>• The gen ed teacher needs to at least have a basic understanding. Have a basic understanding of what all of those students need</li> <li>• UDL strategies or any type of strategy in general to like to support all students accessing the content.</li> <li>• Execute on whatever goals they fidelity is that have in my content area when they're in my classroom</li> <li>• Accommodate with so that they're understanding the material, so they are able to like do it by themselves</li> <li>• IEPs can be written in a way that I feel like I've needed a lot of clarity on and like, I've had to reach out for support.</li> <li>• It can be a little more difficult to understand what the last person was, who wrote it was trying to stay about the goal</li> <li>• Directly apply the IEP like in the school system</li> <li>• Sometimes it is like a little bit wordy</li> <li>• A lot of information, you just sitting there taking in a lot of information especially at the beginning of the process</li> <li>• Process only works if everyone is in attendance</li> <li>• From a teacher standpoint, it's just a lot of explaining where the child is, where we think the child should be</li> <li>• I feel like sometimes that likes it's just so much information that the parent doesn't really know often not all the time</li> <li>• I was a little bit confused because there were like a lot of moving parts</li> <li>• The gen ed teacher needs to at least have a basic understanding. Have a basic understanding of what all of those students need</li> <li>• UDL strategies or any type of strategy in general to like to support all students accessing the content.</li> </ul>	<p>because of like their processing speed and how they take in the information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The signs of someone having a learning disability versus somebody having just a lot of academic gaps.</li> <li>• Lack of motivation versus actual learning disability</li> <li>• Over diagnosis of African American students</li> <li>• Do you think the process is like doing its due diligence when it comes to diagnosing these kids?</li> <li>• Additional challenges of making things feel equitable to all students in that space</li> <li>• How do we uplift special education students in the inclusion space?</li> <li>• And if I do get a training, it is one training that I got for the year. And then I'm supposed to pick up all this information from that one training.</li> <li>• Some of the teachers aren't even special education they put them in that role and they really don't know what they're doing</li> <li>• Some more department meetings to build off each other</li> <li>• More special education meetings</li> <li>• More teachers in the classroom, we need more footwork</li> <li>• We need more teachers and effective teachers</li> <li>• Maybe a company that specializes in what does it mean to have an inclusion classroom and provide that training for us for all of us.</li> <li>• We should bring someone in from outside instead of just relying on people in DEF Prep because maybe we need outside.</li> <li>• Admin be in the classrooms more</li> </ul>	<p>not just curriculum wise, because that's, that's the biggest thing, curriculum wise, there should be an understanding of curriculum, but also just in the aspect of special education itself";</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving and taking feedback</li> <li>• Level of understanding amongst all teachers</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Being proactive for the student needs/addressing the needs</li> <li>• Alignment of what inclusion looks like</li> <li>• Giving and taking feedback</li> <li>• Level of understanding amongst all teachers</li> <li>• Heavy dose of training</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Diving into curriculum</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Being proactive for the student needs/addressing the needs</li> </ul>

*Note.* This table demonstrates all the codes from each focus group.

**Table 13**

*Second Cycle of Coding*

IEPs	Specific learning disability	Inclusion
<p>Groupings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What teachers know about IEPs</li> <li>- Difficulties with IEPs</li> <li>- Difficulty with the IEP Process meeting from teachers’ standpoint</li> <li>- The role of the teachers implementing the IEP with fidelity</li> <li>- Supports teachers would like to receive from leadership about IEPs and special education law</li> </ul> <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Teachers who what an IEP is or have seen IEP before, but they have difficulty with internalizing an IEP</li> <li>-Teachers have major input with creating and updating IEPs they just need training to learn how to create a cohesive IEP to truly reflect the student’s needs, goals, and progress</li> <li>-Teachers would like more training and better inclusive pedagogy resources to support students with disabilities effectively</li> <li>-Although everyone may not have a full understanding of IEPs, there is a common understanding of individualized roles for supporting students with IEPs within the classroom.</li> </ul>	<p>Groupings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowledge of Specific Learning Disabilities</li> <li>- Misconceptions about specific learning disability</li> <li>-Challenges about the topic of specific learning disability</li> <li>-Accommodations used by teachers to help students with disabilities within the classroom</li> <li>- Supports teachers would like to receive from leadership</li> </ul> <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers lack knowledge of specific learning disability due to lack of training</li> <li>• Teachers would like more support for administration to support with teaching students with disabilities within an inclusive setting</li> <li>• Teachers want more training and support so that they can have higher self- efficacy with teaching students with specific learning disability</li> <li>• Teachers have difficulty with identifying students with specific learning disability versus students who have academic gaps or work avoidance</li> </ul>	<p>Groupings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Current/Active Classroom Instruction</li> <li>- Perceptions of teaching within Inclusive Teaching Classroom</li> <li>-Leader Support</li> <li>-Teacher Role</li> <li>-Teacher</li> </ul> <p>Challenges/Barriers within inclusive classroom</p> <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers’ knowledge of inclusive practices but no actual practice of those practices due to no training</li> <li>• Leader to teacher alignment based on what expectations are with inclusion classrooms</li> <li>• Positive attitudes toward receiving professional learning and collaborating to implement inclusive strategies within their classrooms.</li> </ul>

*Note.* This table demonstrates how each code was grouped and the themes derived from every focus group.

## **Member-Checking**

Member-checking was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The purpose of member-checking was to allow participants to correct any errors or misinterpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was used to enhance credibility. A peer reviewed the data throughout the interviewing process to help identify any bias, errors, or different perspectives that were not considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To minimize researcher bias, after finalizing codes and themes, the researcher used member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, a colleague from the special education field was engaged to highlight key terms from each focus group and then compare them to the researcher's transcript. The comparison allowed the researcher to see if any codes or themes that might have been relevant to the study were missed.

Based on the member-checking, ten similarities and three differences were found. The differences included (a) teachers having influence regarding what goes into an IEP about student progress but not fully understanding all components of an IEP and (b) teachers needing support and training about the different parts of the IEP and the roles of general and special education teachers in teaching students with disabilities.

One of the member-checking coding differences found was differentiating the codes based on issues teachers had with actual IEPs versus the IEP process, which includes participation in IEP meetings. Identifying this difference enabled the researcher to ensure that teachers understand both how to prepare for an IEP meeting and how to create a well-written IEP. This identified difference sheds light on the second focus group question, which asked how much experience participants have with reading IEPs, attending IEP meetings, and offering input regarding IEP implementation. Another difference identified in member-checking involved

phrases from the inclusive pedagogy transcript focus group. Excerpts not initially coded, such as “none of the teaching years that I have, where I have had inclusion classes, afforded me the opportunity to really put any type of things in particular place to help students,” revealed a barrier that participants experienced in trying to achieve inclusivity in the classroom. Other excerpts did not specifically state the personal need for training but conveyed teacher struggle with enacting inclusive practices due to a lack of training:

There has to be a heavy dose of training when it comes to inclusion, and not just curriculum-wise, because that is, that is the biggest thing. Curriculum-wise, there should be an understanding of curriculum, but also just in the aspect of SPED itself. (P/UMD, IEP Focus Group)

This excerpt relates to teacher challenges and the role of the teacher in creating an inclusive classroom. To resolve these and other differences found via member-checking, the new phrases identified through member-checking were added to the groupings to help inform the themes. The following sections indicate the findings from each focus group.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This section includes the findings from the qualitative study of the focus groups.

#### **Inclusive Pedagogy Focus Group**

The inclusive pedagogy focus group (group one) consisted of only two participants, as a third participant did not attend the scheduled meeting. Based on participants' discussion of inclusive pedagogy, three themes were derived from the coding: (a) teachers' knowledge of inclusive practices but not being able to implement these inclusive strategies due to lack of training effectively, (b) leader-to-teacher alignment based on inclusive classroom expectations versus what is actually happening in the classroom, and (c) positive teacher attitudes toward receiving professional learning and collaborating to implement inclusive strategies within their classrooms.

Under the first theme of teachers' knowledge of inclusive practices, codes such as "knowing your students' disabilities," "students getting serviced the same," and "no professional development around inclusive pedagogy" are all codes that align with the theme. Participants indicated knowing inclusive pedagogical strategies but had no training on how to implement these strategies within the classroom. Both participants, Ryan and Hunter, also indicated no alignment about how an inclusive classroom should operate. For example, Hunter mentioned, "It starts with just understanding what that looks like for your school." This issue leads back to Theme 2, where participants stated they would like an aligned vision of what inclusion looks like from classroom to classroom.

Collectively, Ryan and Hunter had an idea of what inclusion is and what it may look like; however, they wanted support around what inclusion looks like for their specific school to

implement with fidelity. Ryan mentioned that their idea of inclusions was “when I think of inclusion, I also think of a UDL base classroom. From to where all student's needs are being met at the levels that they’re at.” Hunter mentioned that their definition of inclusion comes from alignment within the school when they used this quote: “I think a lot of it starts with just understanding what that looks like for your school. And how that should look like across the board.” Ryan and Hunter indicated their perceptions of teaching in inclusive classroom settings. Table 14 indicates focus group participants’ demographics.

**Table 14**

*Inclusive Pedagogy Focus Group Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Years of teaching experience
Ryan	Female	10+ years
Hunter	Male	5-7 Years

Table 15 provides an overview of the three theme groups formed based on the codes from the IEP focus group.

**Table 15**

*Inclusive Pedagogy Focus Group Themes and Quotes*

Teachers’ knowledge of inclusive practices but having no actual practice of those practices due to no training	Leader-to-teacher alignment based on what expectations are for inclusion classrooms versus what is actually happening in the classroom	Positive teacher attitudes toward receiving professional learning and collaborating to implement inclusive strategies within their classroom
Knowing your students’ disabilities	Alignment of what inclusion looks like	No professional development around inclusive pedagogy
Students getting serviced the same	Level of understanding amongst all teachers	Like when you lack the experience you need help and assistance and that's where leadership can step in. Even in the summertime, I felt like when we have like AO. I mean, like, I just think overall, like instead of a full day of us just in PD [professional development] like some portions of that week or day could be used for parent engagement.
No professional development around inclusive pedagogy	I can adapt the curriculum to help meet the needs of a student with disabilities in my classroom.	

## Specific Learning Disability Focus Group

Focus Group 2, which consisted of three participants, focused on SLDs. Emergent coding was used to code teachers' knowledge of SLDs, misconceptions about SLD, the teachers' challenges with the topic of SLDs, accommodations teachers give to their students with SLDs, and support teachers need from leadership to teach students with SLDs within their classes.

Based on the codes, four groupings emerged. The themes groupings from this focus group were the following: (a) teachers lack knowledge of SLDs due to lack of training, (b) teachers would like more administration support for teaching SWDs within an inclusive setting, (c) teachers believe more training and support will facilitate higher self-efficacy for teaching students with SLDs, and (d) teachers have challenges with identifying students with SLDs versus students who have academic gaps or work avoidance.

Participants discussed their experiences teaching SWDs as having minimal or no knowledge of SLDs. Parker mentioned within the focus group discussion, "Still don't feel like I understand the differences between disabilities. And what makes it a specific disability rather than something else. So, I want to learn more about that." Charlie added to that claim by talking about their access to professional development on SLDs: "And if I do get a training, it is one training that I got for the year. And then I'm supposed to pick up all this information from that one training." Both Parker and Charlie discussed that minimal access to professional development could cause minimal knowledge of SLDs.

Bailey spoke about how they interpreted particular behaviors from their students, such as losing focus or work avoidance. Bailey discussed observations they noticed in the classroom, such as "I feel like one of the main things I see, just with the kids that I know have specific learning disabilities like the trouble of like focusing, and like following direction." With Bailey's



observations of their thoughts on SLDs, Charlie mentioned it would be beneficial if they knew “how to know which students to flag for a student support process.” Based on the focus group discussion, Charlie, Bailey, and Parker could not determine that student behaviors were a manifestation of their disability because of a lack of knowledge and no training experience from their school context.

The focus group participants reported low self-efficacy in teaching SWDs. For example, Charlie stated, “Well, personally, I don't know anything about it. So I would like to know what whatever you have to offer.” Parker mentioned that they would benefit from professional development and having academic leaders within the classroom space to help with teaching: “If we’re going to have all of these, all these, all of these challenges with all these students, we need more teachers and effective teachers at that not just babysitters and stuff like that.”

Participants with more years of teaching experience, like Charlie, communicated more confident responses, but they also had more experience teaching SWDs. For example, Charlie mentioned accommodations they made in the classroom, such as using “anchor charts, graphic organizer, and fill in the blanks” when they noticed student frustration or low academic levels. Whereas Bailey wanted more support from administration within the classroom because they struggled with differentiating if students had avoided work or if the student was academically delayed: “Also just having admin, like, be in classrooms more, because I, yeah, recently, there has been more admin visiting my class because I literally told them that you have to come to my class.” Table 16 indicates focus group two participant demographics.

**Table 16***Specific Learning Disability Focus Group Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Years of teaching experience
Charlie	Female	10+ years
Bailey	Female	1-3 years
Parker	Female	7-9 years

Table 17 shows the themes analyzed from the SLD focus group with codes that align with each code.

**Table 17***Specific Learning Disability Focus Group Themes and Quotes*

Teachers lack knowledge of specific learning disability due to lack of training	Teachers would like more administration support for teaching students with disabilities within an inclusive setting	Teachers believe more training and support will facilitate higher self-efficacy for teaching students with specific learning disabilities	Teachers have challenges with identifying students with specific learning disability versus students who have academic gaps or work avoidance.
I don't know anything about it	We need more teachers and effective teachers		The signs of someone having a learning disability versus somebody having just a lot of academic gaps.
There is soo much that I still don't know about learning disabilities	Maybe a company that specializes in what does it mean to have an inclusion classroom and provide that training for us for all of us.	Some more department meetings to build off each other	Lack of motivation versus actual learning disability
I haven't had the extensive training, or you know had the knowledge to even know what the differences are.	We should bring someone in from outside instead of just relying on people in DEF Prep because maybe we need outside.	More special education meetings	Over diagnosis of African American students
		I am willing to like learn anything that I can	Do you think the process is like doing its due diligence when it comes to diagnosing these kids?

**Individualized Education Plans**

The third and final focus group, consisting of three participants (see Table 18), discussed IEPs. The conversation concerned participants' IEPs and special education law understanding, their role in making an IEP, their knowledge of special education law, and the support they needed from leadership to serve SWDs better.

**Table 18**

*Individualized Education Plan Focus Groups' Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Years of teaching experience
River	Female	1-3 years
Quinn	Female	1-3 years
Kai	Female	10+ years

**Individualized Education Plan Focus Groups' Demographics**

Participants' phrases were grouped into five subgroups (see Appendix H), which led to the creation of four themes: (a) teachers who know what an IEP is or have seen an IEP before but have difficulty with internalizing an IEP (e.g., understanding the student's present educational levels, goals, and accommodations); (b) teachers have major input with creating and updating IEPs they need training to learn how to create a cohesive IEP yearly to truly reflect the student's needs, goals, and progress; (c) teachers would like more training and better inclusive pedagogy resources to support SWDs effectively; and (d) although everyone may not have a full understanding of IEPs, there is a common understanding of individualized roles for supporting students with IEPs within the classroom.

Theme A was determined from participants feeling they had major input within the IEP process. Kai felt that they had input when it came to the students' IEPs: "I would say, based on the way our school does it, I had a good amount of input" but had difficulty at times with understanding IEPs depending on the complexity of how the IEP was written. Quinn agreed, "Like when I first started teaching, I didn't understand a lot of it. And I can't say I'm perfect now I like I still have a hard time."

Theme B was created from different responses from Quinn, also stating she wants to have training on special education laws to increase her knowledge: "I think they should, like there should be more like PD [professional development] in the summer exclusively for the sped

teachers.” A want for professional development was for teachers to apply that knowledge to the curriculum and the IEP. River wished,

It would have been better for me starting off the school year to have had like, a much deeper understanding of like, what exactly is required? By law, but also like, Yeah, I think would have helped me clarify my practice.

Overall, River, Quinn, and Kai were honest and transparent with how much they knew about the IEPs; they wanted clarification on their roles within the classroom and wanted to increase their knowledge of IEPs through professional development (see Table 19).

**Table 19**

*Individualized Education Plan Focus Groups’ Themes and Quotes*

<p>Teachers knew what an IEP is or have seen IEP before, but they have difficulty with internalizing an IEP</p>	<p>Teachers have major input with creating and updating IEPs they just need training to learn how to create a cohesive IEP to truly reflect the student’s needs, goals, and progress</p>	<p>Teachers would like more training and better inclusive pedagogy resources to support students with disabilities effectively</p>	<p>Although everyone may not have a full understanding of IEPs, there is a common understanding of individualized roles for supporting students with IEPs within the classroom.</p>
<p>IEPs can be written in a way that I feel like I’ve needed a lot of clarity on and like, I’ve had to reach out for support.</p>	<p>I had a good amount of input. Um, I do feel like a sped coordinator allows me to, when we have these meetings, and write these goals to really write them based on my perspective, and what the student needs.</p>	<p>A better understanding more like what exactly is required of the special education teacher.</p>	<p>Execute on whatever goals they fidelity is that have in my content area when they’re in my classroom.</p>
<p>It can be a little more difficult to understand what the last person was, who wrote it was trying to stay about the goal.</p>	<p>I think my input was, was valued when I like would, I would work with the sped coordinator to like, talk through what I noticed in class, and then like, we would work together to create the goal.</p>	<p>Better understanding of those special education laws, I feel like I wasn’t prepared enough to like you know, work with students who had IEPs.</p>	<p>Accommodate with so that they’re understanding the material so they are able to like do it by themselves.</p> <p>To do my best to support that and support the implementation but like transparently in my classroom.</p>

## **Conclusion**

Based on the phrases and themes, all focus group participants had similar experiences and perceptions concerning special education. The overarching themes that derived from all three focus groups were (a) all participants had minimal experience with teaching SWDs within inclusive classroom settings due to lack of knowledge and lack of training, (b) all participants had positive attitudes toward receiving support from their leaders and a willingness for more professional training to support SWDs, and (c) participants would like support from their administration team with strategies to support SWDs within the inclusive setting. Comparatively, the needs assessment results indicated that an intervention addressing special education law and implementing support for SWDs in an inclusion setting was needed for teachers. Both the findings from the needs assessment in Chapter 2 and this focus group indicate a need for professional development or training to increase teachers' knowledge of special education law, SLDs, IEPs, and inclusive education to support SWDs within the inclusive classroom setting better.

The finding from this study is slightly similar to Pancsofar and Petroff (2013) and Royster et al. (2014) regarding teachers having positive perceptions of inclusive practices once they feel more prepared to teach inclusive classes after access and participation in professional development. Both studies also noted that teachers had higher confidence and self-efficacy with teaching within inclusive classroom settings with increased knowledge of inclusive pedagogy. These findings from Pancsofar and Petroff (2013) and Royster et al. (2014) suggested that both novice and in-service teachers would benefit from training specifically on special education topics such as inclusive pedagogy, IEPs, and types of disabilities to feel more confident teaching SWDs.

## **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The sample size for this study (eight participants) and the results reflects teachers' perceptions and beliefs; thus, these findings may not fully represent the school's larger teacher population. Additionally, participants may have limited their responses within the focus group. This limitation could be because participants felt that the researcher might have mentioned their responses to leaders, although the researcher mentioned that everything remained confidential (Mishra, 2016). As a special educator teacher with several years of experience and strong relationships with the leadership team, participants may feel more comfortable sharing their responses with individuals with a similar status (Bourke, 2014).

## **Implications**

Based on the findings of this study and in alignment with extant research, implications for further research show that professional development is highly recommended to improve inclusion teachers' confidence, knowledge, and self-efficacy in teaching SWDs (Navarro et al., 2016). It is shown in the current findings that all participants advocated for more than one professional development, specifically on teaching SWDs during the school year and more leadership support. With ongoing professional development, teachers can become more effective inclusion teachers who positively affect SWDs (Sokal & Sharma, 2017). Along with training teachers to be effective, with more effective teachers, one can ensure a successful, inclusive school to service all students (Sokal & Sharma, 2017).

Implications for students show that for SWDs to grow within content and be closer to their grade-level peers, teachers must be more knowledgeable and confident in teaching SWDs (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006). For students to be more focused (Scott et al., 2019), confident, and

comfortable within the classroom, SWDs need to have the accommodations within their IEPs effectively implemented within the general education classroom, as they spend 80% of their day in the general education setting. Without knowledge of SWDs and limited professional development, the student's academics ultimately suffer (Knight et al., 2019).

### **Future Research**

Findings from both need assessments showed that participants had limited access to professional development or trainings on teaching SWDs in the inclusive classroom setting. Despite the fact that some participants had been teaching for many years, no teacher reported having had more than two opportunities to learn about SWDs. To further examine the issue of teachers' limited knowledge of special education, more research regarding why special education is not a priority in professional development in schools should be conducted. In my own work context, I was able to work with my administrative team to embed workshops in the yearly calendar for teachers, provide access to the paid self-paced professional development trainings that OSSE provides for teachers in Washington, DC, and clarify coteaching models for special education teachers and general education teachers to help create effective inclusive classroom settings to support SWDs.

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## Appendix A

### Process Research Questions

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Research questions	
Research Question 1	What percentage of teachers rated the individualized learning modules as having been clear and engaging?
Research Question 2	What percentage of teachers incorporated inclusive pedagogy within their lessons?
Research Question 3	To what extent were inclusion teachers engaged and participating in professional development?
Research Question 4	What were the barriers that prevented inclusion teachers from completing or engaging within professional development?
Research Question 5	What percentage of inclusion teachers increased their knowledge of IDEA performance on the posttest than their pretest after the professional development?
Research Question 6	To what extent did inclusion teachers' self-efficacy of teaching SWD in an inclusion setting increase after the intervention compared to the beginning of the intervention?

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## Appendix B

### Outcome Research Questions

Outcome evaluation question	Construct	Data sources	Data collection tools	Frequency
What percentage of teachers increased their knowledge of IDEA performance on the post-test compared to their pretest after the professional development?	Knowledge of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)- Teacher's understanding of special education law in the classroom setting to utilize IEPs for classroom instruction	Special Education Teachers	Quantitative- Education Law Knowledge Survey	A day before the self-paced modules are assigned and a day after the intervention.
		General Education Teachers	10 questions, true or false survey.  Survey created by O'Connor et al. (2016).	
To what extent did inclusion teachers' self-efficacy of teaching SWD in an inclusion setting increase after the intervention compared to the beginning of the intervention?	Teacher Self Efficacy	Special Education Teachers	Qualitative- Focus group or post interview	A day before the self-paced modules are assigned and a day after the intervention.
		General Education Teacher	Quantitative- Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale Survey 5-point Likert-type (no confidence at all (1) to complete confidence (5))  Survey adapted from Solomon et al. (2013)	

## Appendix C

### Special Education Law Survey

Insights into Learning Disabilities 13(1), 7-18, 2016

**Table 1. Questions, Correct Answer, Number of Responses, and Percentage Correct**

Question	Correct Answer	Number of Responses	% Correct
The child's IEP is reviewed by the IEP team at least once a year, or more often if the parents or school make such a request.	TRUE	43	95
IDEA (IDEIA) indicates that a student who has a disability should have the opportunity to be educated in the least restrictive environment. This means they should be educated with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.	TRUE	43	95
If a teacher thinks that a child has not been making progress he/she can recommend that they remain in special education without being reevaluated.	FALSE	42	88
IDEA (IDEIA) requires that specific learning disability determination takes into account the appropriateness of instruction received by the child within the regular educational setting.	TRUE	42	88
An IEP only includes information about a student's short and long-term educational goals.	FALSE	43	74
Funding under IDEA (IDEIA) is available for professional development.	TRUE	41	71
IDEA (IDEIA) requires that specific learning disability determination takes into account the qualification of the teacher providing instruction within the educational setting.	TRUE	42	64

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According to IDEA (IDEIA), students involved in drug, weapon, or other dangerous behaviors can be placed in interim placement for up to 10 days, all other offenses the child must remain in the current educational setting.	FALSE	41	54
According to IDEA (IDEIA), a three-year re-evaluation is not required if the parent and local educational agency deem it unnecessary.	TRUE	43	33
IDEA (IDEIA) requires that observations of students be conducted by the student's current teacher	FALSE	40	15

## Appendix D

### Perception of Teaching Students With Disabilities Survey

Teaching Students With Disabilities					
I can adapt the curriculum to help meet the needs of a student with disabilities in my classroom.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can use a wide variety of strategies for teaching the curriculum to enhance understanding for all of my students, specifically those with disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can adjust my lesson plans to meet the needs of all of my students, regardless of their ability level.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of high-achieving students and low-achieving students simultaneously.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can break down a skill into its component parts to facilitate learning for students with disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can be an effective team member and work collaboratively with other teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to help my students with disabilities reach their goals.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can model positive behavior for all students with or without disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can consult with an intervention specialist or other specialist when I need help, without harming my own morale.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can give consistent praise for students with disabilities, regardless of how small or slow the progress is.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident

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Teaching Students With Disabilities

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I can encourage students in my class to be good role models for students with disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can effectively encourage all of my students to accept those with disabilities in my classroom.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can create an environment that is open and welcoming for students with disabilities in my classroom.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can establish meaningful relationships with my students with disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can effectively deal with disruptive behaviors in the classroom, such as tantrums.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can remain in control of a situation that involves a major temper tantrum in my classroom.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident
I can manage a classroom that includes students with disabilities.	Not Confident At All	Slightly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Fairly Confident	Completely Confident

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## Appendix E

### Individualized Education Plan Focus Group Codes

What Teachers know about IEPs	Difficulties with IEPs	Difficulty with the IEP process or meeting from teacher's standpoint	The role of the teachers implementing the IEP with fidelity	Supports teachers would like to receive from leadership about IEPs and special education law
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't really have a big understanding of IEP</li> <li>• I know what it is and know that when looking at IEP reading one you can see like the accomplishments the student has or goals that they're working toward</li> <li>• Based on their evaluation, they need specific additional accommodations to meet certain goals</li> <li>• Legal document that tells like lays out what teachers need to actually do like what they're required by law to do for that student</li> <li>• Mandates the school to adhere to it</li> <li>• Collaborative process to support the students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IEPs can be written in a way that I feel like I've needed a lot of clarity on and like, I've had to reach out for support.</li> <li>• If you're not familiar with it like parents, you'd have a lot of like it would be a challenging document to like you especially because its [sic] like its [sic] so long.</li> <li>• It can be a little more difficult to understand what the last person was, who wrote it was trying to stay about the goal</li> <li>• Directly apply the IEP like in the school system</li> <li>• Sometimes it is like a little bit wordy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lot of information, you just sitting there taking in a lot of information especially at the beginning of the process</li> <li>• Overwhelming the parents with a lot of information</li> <li>• Process only works if everyone is in attendance</li> <li>• From a teacher standpoint, it's just a lot of explaining where the child is, where we think the child should be</li> <li>• I feel like sometimes that likes [sic] its [sic] just so much information that the parent doesn't really know often not all the time</li> <li>• I was a little bit confused because there were like a lot of moving parts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Execute on whatever goals they fidelity is that have in my content area when they're in my classroom</li> <li>• Accommodate with so that they're understanding the material so they are able to, like, do it by themselves</li> <li>• To do my best to support that and support the implementation but like transparently in my classroom</li> <li>• The gen ed teacher needs to at least have a basic understanding. Have a basic understanding of what all of those students need</li> <li>• UDL strategies or any type of strategy in general to like to support all students accessing the content.</li> <li>• My responsibility is just to help them meet the goal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A better understanding more like what exactly is required of the special education teacher</li> <li>• Better understanding of those special education laws, I feel like I wasn't prepared enough to like you know, work with students who had IEPs</li> <li>• Parallel special education curriculum to help special education teachers</li> <li>• Some type of foundational special education curriculum</li> <li>• Getting like teachers more training on how to work with special education students</li> <li>• I think they needs to actually improve the GEN ED curriculum first and like backward like and then add on like recommendations accommodations</li> <li>• Professional development in the summer exclusively for special education teachers</li> </ul>

## Appendix F

### Specific Learning Disability Focus Group Codes

Knowledge of Specific Learning Disabilities	Misconceptions about specific learning disability	Challenges about the topic of specific learning disability	Accommodations used by teachers to help students with disabilities within their classrooms	Supports teachers would like to receive from leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't know anything about it</li> <li>• I am willing to like learn anything that I can</li> <li>• There is so much that I still don't know about learning disabilities</li> <li>• I haven't had the extensive training, or you know had the knowledge to even know what the differences are</li> <li>• The kids that I know have specific learning disability like the trouble of like focusing, and like following directions and it's because of like their processing speed and how they take in the information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The signs of someone having a learning disability versus somebody having just a lot of academic gaps.</li> <li>• Lack of motivation versus actual learning disability</li> <li>• Over diagnosis of African American students</li> <li>• Do you think the process is like doing its due diligence when it comes to diagnosing these kids?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional challenges of making things feel equitable to all students in that space</li> <li>• How do we uplift special education students in the inclusion space?</li> <li>• And if I do get a training, it is one training that I got for the year. And then I'm supposed to pick up all this information from that one training.</li> <li>• Some of the teachers aren't even special education they put them in that role and they really don't know what they're doing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headset with a microphone and have them do speech to text</li> <li>• Anchor charts or like reference sheets</li> <li>• Colored pens, and like draw number lines</li> <li>• Fill in the blanks</li> <li>• Anchor charts</li> <li>• Graphic organizers</li> <li>• Copies of synonyms</li> <li>• Read aloud</li> <li>• Books on YouTube</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some more department meetings to build off each other</li> <li>• More special education meetings</li> <li>• More teachers in the classroom, we need more footwork</li> <li>• We need more teachers and effective teachers</li> <li>• Maybe a company that specializes in what does it mean to have an inclusion classroom and provide that training for us for all of us.</li> <li>• We should bring someone in from outside instead of just relying on people in DEF Prep because maybe we need outside.</li> <li>• Admin be in the classrooms more.</li> </ul>

## Appendix G

### Inclusive Pedagogy Focus Group Codes

Current/active classroom instruction	Perceptions of teaching within inclusive teaching classroom	Leader support	Teacher role	Teacher challenges/barriers within inclusive classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective teaching</li> <li>• Providing proper resources</li> <li>• Actively working along with teachers and their classmates</li> <li>• Highly, structured lectures</li> <li>• Interactive activities</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Video lessons</li> <li>• Visuals and reminders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodations being met</li> <li>• Students getting serviced the same</li> <li>• UDL base classroom</li> <li>• Delivering instruction in a variety of ways</li> <li>• Creating the safe space</li> <li>• Knowing learning modalities</li> <li>• Knowing your student disabilities</li> <li>• Grouping students based on academic abilities</li> <li>• Progress monitoring</li> <li>• Co-teacher model/dynamic</li> <li>• None of the teaching years that I have, where I have had inclusion classes, afforded me the opportunity to really put any type of things in particular place to help students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment of what inclusion looks like</li> <li>• Giving and taking feedback</li> <li>• Level of understanding amongst all teachers</li> <li>• Heavy dose of training</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Diving into curriculum</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Being proactive for the student needs/addressing the needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving and taking feedback</li> <li>• Level of understanding amongst all teachers</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Being proactive for the student needs/addressing the needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IEP not fully reflecting the needs or social emotional behaviors</li> <li>• Parent engagement</li> <li>• Lacking experience with disabilities</li> <li>• No professional development around inclusive pedagogy</li> <li>• Parents not fully understanding an IEP</li> <li>• there has to be a heavy dose of training when it comes to inclusion. And not just curriculum wise, because that's, that's the biggest thing, curriculum wise, there should be an understanding of curriculum, but also just in the aspect of special education itself";</li> </ul>