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## An exploration of teacher dispositions: Expectation of potential

Kathleen Louise Saleh  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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2018

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AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHER DISPOSITIONS:  
EXPECTATION OF POTENTIAL

An Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Approved:

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Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp, Committee Chair

---

Dr. Patrick Pease

Interim Dean of the Graduate College

Kathleen Louise Saleh  
University of Northern Iowa

July 2018

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative investigation of three, K-12, in-service special education teachers' dispositions employs the pillars of Disability Studies in Education (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008) and Villegas' (2007) definition of disposition to interpret the observational and interview data. Central to the study are the teachers' beliefs about their students' learning potential and the impact of those beliefs on their instructional behaviors—dispositions—that support or hinder social justice. Consideration is also given to the educational and life experiences that the educators identify as contributing to their professional disposition. Analysis of the data demonstrated five primary themes. (1) Disposition, although influential in the classroom, is not easily defined. (2) Life and educational experiences shape the educator's disposition/s; (3) the participants' primary perception of disability is rooted in the medical model. (4) Participants expressed frustrations with the current model of special education and the lack of professional respect they experience. Finally, (5) the inquiry and opportunity to discuss their beliefs and practices stimulated the teachers' self-reflection.

*Keywords:* K-12 special education; teacher dispositions; Disability Studies in Education; social justice; reflection

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Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp, Chair

---

Dr. Amy Petersen, Committee Member

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Dr. Christopher Kliwer, Committee Member

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Dr. Gloria Kirkland Holmes, Committee Member

Kathleen Louise Saleh  
University of Northern Iowa  
July 2018

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Louise. I cannot recall a time when you did not speak words of potential into me. The resilience and creativity that you model, coupled with your faith, continue to inspire me.

Additionally, I dedicate this project to my children, grandchildren, and students. Each of you has impacted my understanding and celebration of difference.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (e.g., K-12) classroom teacher in the US is charged with the responsibility of supporting all of their students' academic progress. The law expects all students, grades K-12, to make academic, behavioral, and social gains in order to achieve learning outcomes. National standards seek to ensure that quality teachers effectively meet these objectives. The degree to which these expectations are accomplished in the K-12 system is tied closely to the educator's disposition. Disposition is defined in this research as, "tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs" (Villegas, 2007, p. 373). The beliefs and assumptions that an individual teacher has shapes their patterns of behavior—a teacher may have the content knowledge, skills, and training needed to teach, but lack the disposition to effectively guide learning. It is important to consider the disposition of the instructor (Ayers, 2004; Katz & Rath, 1985; Knopp & Smith, 2005; Thornton, 2006; Villegas, 2007; Welch, Pitts, Tenini, Kuenlen, & Wood, 2010).

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and dispositions of three in-service special education teachers. My study is an observational and interview study with three in-service teachers in my region of the country, using Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) "portraiture" method. Portraiture is a qualitative methodology that blends art and science in an effort to capture the wholeness of the participant. I was curious about the relationship between instructional practices and the in-service teacher's dispositions, as

well as the beliefs and experiences that contributed to the formation of their dispositions regarding student potential. The use of both interview and observational techniques in the teachers' classrooms supported my inquiry of both their beliefs and observed behaviors.

### Research Questions

My primary research questions were: (1) what does the special education in-service teacher believe about his or her students' learning potential? (2) How do these beliefs inform practice? And (3) what life experiences or educational training do the in-service teachers attribute to the formation of their professional dispositions?

Acknowledging that beliefs and assumptions translate into observable actions, Welch et al. (2010) describe the value in identifying dispositions: "Once the necessary dispositions associated with teaching are identified, specific behaviors of teachers as effective professionals should be determined and assessed" (p. 199). The establishment of a standardized assessment of disposition and beliefs is not the goal of this research, but I assert there is potency in the examination of the dispositions expressed by in-service educators.

This study puts teacher understanding and experience at the center. Dispositions may be tied to the unobserved cognitive level of the classroom, but this underlying attribute of the educator is an influential variable (Combs et al., 1969; Katz & Raths, 1985; Thornton, 2006; Welch et al., 2010; Wilkerson & Lang, 2011). By studying the expressed beliefs and observed practices of special education teachers, I strive to better understand dispositions that promote social justice (Villegas, 2007) and "presume competence" (Biklen, 2005), while fulfilling the mandate established in teaching

standards. In this vein, I briefly introduce Dispositions and Disability Studies in Education (DSE) in this chapter, and then the discussion moves to Societal Influences, Legal Policies, and Underwhelming Results in special education, to better frame the study.

### Dispositions

A teacher's disposition is central to lesson design and implementation.

Dispositions and other affective domain attributes may not be identified on transcripts or standardized measures. Burkhardt (2014) found that dispositions may outweigh the merits of grades and standardized test scores, which suggests that teachers play a significant role in their students' achievement: "Good teachers matter, as social agents who are sensitive to the learning potential of their students" (Burkhardt, 2014, p. 4). Examination of teachers' dispositions is not only necessary, but critical for the promotion of equitable learning opportunities.

Equal to content mastery and pedagogical practice is the disposition of the teacher. Burkhardt (2014) challenges leaders in education to dedicate time to study the practices and beliefs held by in-service teachers: "Successful advances in special education not only depend upon what is being taught but also by whom" (p. 11). The disposition of the in-service special education teacher is tied to student success.

Likewise, McLeskey, Rosenberg, and Westling (2013) assert that beliefs and dispositions that appreciate human difference are no less valuable than content mastery: "The most effective teachers have a disposition that values human differences and recognizes the importance of being a good teacher for all students" (p. 23). A

professional disposition that assumes responsibility for the learning of all students is foundational: “If you plan to be a professional educator, it is critically important that you accept the responsibility to teach all students regardless of their different challenges or special needs” (McLeskey et al., 2013, p. 23). Teachers who possess a disposition that inclines them to provide learning opportunities for all of their students, with the expectation of achievement, promote social access and independence.

Ayers (2004) suggests that all teachers share a common objective: “All teachers at all times—regardless of philosophy, method, technique, or approach—want their students to become in some new way stronger, to have greater knowledge or capacity, to be more skilled or able or vigorous, to be able to survive or succeed in some new way” (p. 142). In other words, the universal goal of teachers is the empowerment of their students. Although the expressed goal of most teachers is the success of their students, the strength of a teacher’s disposition may directly impact, either negatively or positively, the achievement of that goal.

Ayers (2004) compares the experiences of the teacher to the black medical bag carried by a midwife: “Teachers accumulate experiences, skills, and techniques. They develop a repertoire that is complex, multilayered, and idiosyncratic” (p. 115). The unique experiences, beliefs, and education of each teacher contributes to their beliefs and assumptions about their students’ potential, and these attributes shape the teacher’s distinctive disposition.

### Disability Studies in Education

Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, and Morton (2008) identified four tenets to clarify the study of Disability. The underpinnings of their statement reflect an organizational structure for research and advocacy. Connor et al. (2008) suggest the need to “contextualize disability within political and social spheres” (p. 448), prioritize “the interests, agendas, and voices of people labelled [sic] with disability/disabled people” (p. 448), promote “social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labelled [sic] with disability/disabled people” (p. 448), and “assume competence and reject deficit models of disability” (p. 448). The pillars identified by Disability Studies in Education (DSE) align with the interest of this study and provide a framework for understanding and interpretation. By recognizing the influence of society and advocating for equity, DSE promotes a critical examination of disability for the advancement of social justice.

### Societal Influences

The practice of ranking and sorting students is rooted in an assumption, or belief, about a student’s societal value. Observing that schools seek to categorize and rank students based on ability, and teachers are charged to assist those students who do not achieve expected norms, Brantlinger (2007) noted: “Prescribed remedies, however, inevitably solidify rather than reduce disparities” (p. 238). Special education services, designed to remediate, sometimes actually contribute to ranking and sorting based on the assigned social value of the student.



In an effort to understand the influence of classification, Goffman (1963) provides a sociological explanation: “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). Classification of a person based on the possession of socially preferred attributes ultimately results in the assignment of “stigma” for those who do not share the desired characteristics.

Classification of an individual based on difference fails to capture the complexity of a person’s identity. The perceived stigma (Goffman, 1963), or discrediting attribute, is viewed as the individual’s identity; this is a reductive classification approach. Limitations and disabilities are examples of “undesirable attributes” which Goffman (1963) credits with the formation of an identity anchored in stigma. The assignment of stigma to an individual has often resulted in dehumanizing and isolating behaviors. Goffman (1963) describes the interactions between individuals who have physically identifiable disabilities and the non-disabled as, at best, strained and uncomfortable. Defining social settings where those considered “stigmatized” and those perceived as “normals” interface as “mixed contacts,” Goffman (1963) asserts that the awkwardness of the social setting is heightened for the “normal,” as they have limited opportunities with “mixed-contact” experiences.

Based on this premise that schools and classrooms are “mixed-contact” environments, it is an environment worthy of closer examination. Goffman (1963) notes that repeatedly strained interactions have a negative impact on the stigmatized person: “It has the effect of cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands a

discredited person facing an unaccepting world” (p. 19). An educator’s practices may undermine the students’ self-worth. Goffman (1963) warns that individuals who are stigmatized may concur with the majority mindset: “Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing” (p. 7). Students may reduce their own expectations and sense of competence when their teacher embodies a disposition that relies on a reductive classification. Based on the potency of the educator’s disposition, examination of the interactions that take place in the “mixed-contact” environment is supported.

Schools, as systems within society, hold a degree of power and authority. Identifying the beliefs that shape a teacher’s disposition involves the individual’s ability to distinguish and express their beliefs; this can be hindered by the influence of the agenda of the system that employs them. In his examination of social structures and power, sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) reviews the political and economic role of the education system. Given the indoctrination into the “mass medium,” or established system of education, Mills (1956) argues that the social man is ill prepared to recognize the frustrating hierarchy of society. Mills (1956) suggests individuals struggle to objectively express their thoughts: “the citizen cannot now see the roots of his own biases and frustrations, nor think clearly about himself, nor for that matter about anything else” (p. 319). As part of the system, members are inculcated and procreate the establishment. Members of established systems often lack a “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1956).

The scholarship of both Goffman (1963) and Mills (1956) align with the description of special education as provided by Charlton (1998). The assignment of labels remains part of the current system of special education. Charlton (1998) describes how labels “oppress the people they define. They do so on two levels. First, they imply we are inferior. Second, they allow the dominant culture to institutionalize those of us they consider outcasts and misfits” (Charlton, 1998, p. 163). The influence of both society and the system of education, specifically the current model of special education, must be considered when investigating what in-service teachers believe about their students’ potential and how those beliefs drive their instructional decisions.

#### Legal Policies

Birthered from the “Separate but Equal” ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and described as a “Paradigmatic Shift” by Hewitt (2011), the early 1960s produced legislation designed to safeguard all citizens. Statutes addressed a range of issues where inequity was evident. The intent of the legislation was to prohibit discrimination based on race, disability, or gender.

By the middle of the 1980s, there was a push for students who were identified as disabled to be integrated into their general education classrooms. Madeline Will, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education at the time, described the potential as a “shared responsibility” between the general and special education teachers: “the educational needs of all students be met through teams of regular and special teachers and support staff working toward that goal” (Bartlett, Etscheidt, & Weisenstein, 2007, p. 7). The expectation, of the then Secretary of Education, was to ensure increased educational

opportunities for all students and the delivery of specialized services in the least restrictive setting.

The United States federal government continued to scrutinize the public school system, defining and protecting the educational opportunities afforded to students identified as disabled. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) was designed in the George W. Bush administration to ensure that schools were held responsible for the academic progress of all students; The Obama administration's *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) shifted primary power and responsibility from Washington to the individual state level. At the federal and state level, the expectation of equity and achievement of all students enrolled in public schools has remained central to educational legislation.

The overarching legal protection of educational rights for students identified as disabled is the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). Prior to the changes made to IDEA (1990), the legislation was known as the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA). IDEA (1990) was reauthorized in 2004, and enacted July 1, 2005: "IDEA is essentially a contract between the federal government and each state, whereby the state agrees to follow certain regulations in exchange for federal funds" (Bartlett et al., 2007, p.11). IDEA, or Public Law 108-446, ensures that students identified as eligible for special education and related services are provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Furthermore, IDEA necessitates an individualized education program (IEP) be written to describe an identified student's educational plan.

Of primary interest and concern is why, with legislation, standards, and expectations for our in-service teachers to produce learning outcomes for all students,

does the current delivery system of special education lag in producing the desired academic gains? In part, my curiosity regarding the dispositions and beliefs of in-service special education teachers is rooted in the underwhelming results produced by the current model of special education—despite the intent of the law.

### Underwhelming Results

The Iowa Department of Education (2017) publishes the *Annual Assessment Results* each year. The document includes a disaggregation of student groups. “Disability” is one of the categories of students included on the report. This subgroup represents students who have an *Individualized Education Program*. In the 2016-2017, academic year, 34,528 students graduated in the state of Iowa. The graduation rate for the “All Students” group of 91.3% compared to the graduation rate of 69.5% for the “Disability” group. Decreased graduation rates demand attention, but student attrition is only one reason for further consideration of the current model of special education.

To further illustrate the need for continued study, students are given *Iowa Assessment* and the *Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) Alternative Assessment* in grades 3 to 8, and again in the 11th grade in the subject areas of math, reading, and science. Overall, fourth grade students demonstrated 75.3% proficiency in reading for the 2016-2017 academic year. Yet, only 34.8% of fourth grade students identified as the “Disability” group were able to read at a proficient rate during the same school year (Iowa Department of Education, 2017, p. 3). These students have been recipients of special education services designed to remediate and increase their reading proficiency, but the achievement gap provides reason for investigation.

The discrepancy in the content area of mathematics is not much more promising. Across the state, eleventh grade students were proficient in math at a rate of 82.4% during the 2016-2017 school year, while their eleventh grade peers with an IEP demonstrated 38.4% proficiency in math (Iowa Department of Education, 2017, p. 3). Given the discrepancy in academic achievement, it is prudent to engage in research about factors that may contribute to these underwhelming results.

Ryndak et al. (2014) suggest that, for students who are identified as having more significant disabilities, another underwhelming result of the current model of special education is the lack of inclusion and participation in the general education classroom. Ryndak et al. (2014) assert that there is a “lack of attention” (p. 66) given to collection and analysis of student data from both “general education and special education contexts” (Ryndak et al., 2014, p. 66). The lack of scrutiny contributes to the: “stagnation of students with significant disabilities in segregated special education settings” (Ryndak et al., 2014, p. 66). Challenging the macro, Ryndak et al. (2014) call for examination of federal policies, district implementation plans, and current assessment models that fail to include students in the general education curriculum and classroom.

### Organization of the Study

This dissertation has six chapters, and I discuss the content of the following chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of literature related to the concepts explored: dispositions—for both the pre-service teacher and in-service teacher, concerns related to identifying desired dispositions, professional teaching standards and the expectation of

potential or the “presumption of competence” (Biklen, 2005), and the contrast between the medical model and the social construction model of disability. Discussion also includes the current model of special education and the value of reflective practices for the classroom teacher.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the study’s design and portraiture methodology used (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) for this research project. Next, data procedures and ethical considerations are outlined, followed by a description of my participant selection, including the established criteria.

Chapter 4 is the first of two data chapters, which includes the individual portraits of my three participants. The portraits are based on the transcribed interviews and conversations with the three in-service special education teachers, as well as their personal teaching philosophy statements and the field notes from my observations of their classrooms and instructional practices.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the themes derived from the analysis of the data. (1) Although not easily or universally understood, all participants described the disposition/s necessary for their profession. (2) The special education teachers credit their life and educational experiences with shaping their current disposition/s. (3) Participating special education teachers demonstrated a reliance on the medical model. (4) Likewise, each of the participants addressed frustrations with the current model of special education and expressed a sense of disrespect from colleagues. Finally, (5) the study provided the participants a space to reflect on their disposition and their professional practices. The

recorded reflections appeared to promote introspection; dispositional development—and system reform—are both anchored in the ability to reflect.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I highlight my contribution to the examination of dispositions. Also, I make some suggestions about how the insights gained from this study may benefit both pre-service and in-service teachers. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future or extended research.



## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss scholarship that builds a rationale for the examination of teachers' dispositions. This chapter is organized with four primary sections: (1) Dispositions, (2) Disability Studies in Education (DSE), (3) Teaching Standards, and (4) Special Education. Collectively, a general understanding of these four areas will assist in understanding why and how I set up the dissertation research as I did. I address each section in turn.

#### Dispositions

For over a half of a century, the “tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs” (Villegas, 2007, p. 373)—teacher dispositions—have been of interest to researchers. Attention has been given to both the pre-service teacher (those preparing for a career as a teacher) and the in-service teacher (those currently employed as educators). Early efforts demonstrated both the value and challenge of investigating dispositions. Preliminary research regarding the impact of dispositions is attributed to Combs et al. (1969), who explore the ideologies and practices that shaped the “helping professions” (p. 3), like teaching. Demonstrating the need for both observation and interview, Combs et al. (1969) linked observable behaviors to beliefs and assumptions in an effort to better align their participants' words with their actions. Ultimately, this pioneer study demonstrated that effective teachers viewed their students as “able” (Combs et al., 1969, p. 33).

Continuing in this research tradition, Katz and Raths (1985) provide a definition in the study of disposition/s: “An attributed characteristic of a teacher, one that summarizes the trend of a teacher’s actions in particular contexts” (p. 301). Clarifying the difference between beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions, Katz and Raths (1985) assert that attitudes “predispose” an individual to behave in a certain way: “The focus is upon *pre-*dispositions to act; we employ the term *disposition* as a summary of actions observed” (p. 302). The preliminary work by these authors has been foundational to the study of teacher disposition/s.

The majority of research acknowledges the impact of beliefs and disposition on instructional decisions and classroom behaviors. Pajares (1992) asserts: “Few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom” (p. 307). In an effort to demonstrate the relationship between beliefs and dispositions, Richardson (2003) defined beliefs as: “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” (p. 2). Additionally, Richardson (2003) notes a distinction between beliefs and knowledge in pre-service teachers: “Beliefs are accepted as true by the individual holding the belief, but they do not require epistemic warrant. Knowledge, however, does” (p. 3). The study of disposition is tied to the subjective beliefs that educators hold to be true.

Of primary interest to this study is the research of Villegas (2007), who values the investigation of disposition as a safeguard for social justice. Villegas (2007) considers the impact of identifying and grouping students based on attributes: “And teachers, whether

consciously or not, play a critical role in the sorting process” (p. 371). Villegas’ (2007) response to those who assert standardized dispositions are politically motivated violations of the First Amendment is that educators must be responsive to students who have previously been excluded from educational opportunities.

Attention must be given to the disposition of teachers to ensure social justice. The disposition of equity and social justice is a necessary component of “teachers who aim to make a difference in the lives of diverse students” (Villegas, 2007, p. 372). Actions reflect the disposition of the teacher, and those instructional practices must ensure equitable access for all students.

The beliefs that educators have about their students’ potential and the instructional decisions that those teachers make to promote their students’ access are reflective of a disposition of social justice: “Tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs” (Villegas, 2007, p. 373) is the definition of disposition used for this study. Villegas (2007) further refines the definition to describe a disposition of social justice: “the tendency to act in ways that give all students access to knowledge” (p. 375). The definition captures the “summary of actions observed” (Katz & Raths, 1985, p. 302) and the high expectations of an educator who “presumes competence” (Biklen, 2005).

Based on the belief that all children can learn and should have equal access, as described by teaching standards and the DSE agenda, Villegas’ (2007) definition of disposition is central to this study. At the time of this writing, this definition has been cited over 390 times in scholarship. Since 2017, Villegas (2007) has been cited in more

than 60 books and articles. Learning about beliefs, as Villegas (2007) recommends, is evidenced in the research completed by her and others. Literature that continues to build on this definition spans a multitude of topics including: dispositions, teaching, learning, social justice, and teacher preparation programs. Working from this definition, I now discuss pre- and in-service teachers within the disposition framework.

### Pre-Service Teacher Dispositions

Pre-service teachers are training for employment in the classroom, and such a position involves regular interactions with students from all walks of life. The all-encompassing objective of teacher education programs should be the preparation of teacher candidates who can teach all students, “so that, as adults, all are able to participate equitably in the economic and political life of the country” (Villegas, 2007, p. 372). A comprehensive list of observable behaviors that teachers who possess a disposition that promotes equity may demonstrate is shared by Villegas (2007; Appendix A). By explicitly identifying behaviors that promote social justice, teacher education programs can prepare their students for the diversity of their future classrooms.

Villegas’ (2007) goal is for pre-service teachers to “understand the connections between and among teacher beliefs about students, teacher actions in classrooms, and student outcomes” (p. 375). Villegas (2007) highlights negative impact of educators who lack a disposition of social justice:

Thus, teachers who perceive learners as deficient in some way are more apt to make negative judgments about students’ potential. Lacking faith in the students’ ability to achieve, these teachers are more likely to form low academic expectations of the children and ultimately to treat them in ways that stifle their learning. (Villegas, 2007, p. 374)

A disposition that lacks social justice may not only affect learning, but also ultimately impact lifelong opportunities. Based on the influence of disposition, Villegas (2007) monitors her pre-service teachers' evolving dispositions by continually evaluating their reflective journals.

Analysis of field notes and self-reflection was also part of Trzcinka's and Grskovic's (2011) examination of pre-service special education teachers' dispositions. Based on high demand and few qualified applicants, within the profession of special education, Trzcinka's and Grskovic's (2011) explore pre-service teachers' "ability to think back on a situation and analyze the related variables for the purpose of learning from it" (p. 62). Trzcinka and Grskovic (2011) suggest: "the results of this study support the value of engaging in field experiences with students with disabilities and the value of reflecting on those experiences. Those reflections reveal a great deal about candidates, including their disposition to teach in special education" (p. 66). It is critical that teacher preparation programs foster dispositions in future teachers that promote engagement and success for all students.

Schussler and Knarr (2013) propose that each time a teacher makes an instructional decision it is based on their interpretation: "actions are understood within the context of each person's intention to achieve particular purposes" (Schussler & Knarr, 2013, p. 72). By enabling teachers to understand that they are disposed to behave in a particular manner, they may better match their actions to their beliefs. Based on this understanding, Schussler and Knarr (2013) believe teacher candidates need an increased awareness of their dispositions: "This does not mean indoctrinating them with specific

political ideologies as some have criticized. It does mean helping teachers to become more aware of how their values affect what they do with students each day” (p. 83-84). Teachers must ensure their values demonstrate their care for their pupils: “In other words, teachers must foster each student’s development—intellectually, socially, emotionally, morally—which requires being in relationship with each student” (Schussler & Knarr, 2013, p. 77). The teacher’s disposition impacts student development.

In an attempt to capture the evolution of future special education teachers’ dispositions, LePage, Nielsen, and Fearn (2008) compared vision statements from students nearing graduation and those early in their program of study:

Whether the teachers in this study are right or wrong in their beliefs and perceptions at the start of their program is not a question to be addressed here. What is important is that many already have developed assumptions about children’s strengths, weaknesses, self-esteem, and potential at such an early stage in their preparation. (LePage et al., 2008, p. 91)

Based on an understanding that teacher candidates enter their programs of study with preconceived notions, it is critical that teacher educators challenge them to identify and question their beliefs. To achieve this end, reflection must be taught, modeled, and embedded in teacher preparatory courses (LePage et al., 2008).

In sum, the potency of a pre-service teacher’s disposition on their students’ learning opportunities demands that teacher education programs attend to future teachers’ dispositional development. Examination of the pre-service teacher’s disposition is not only mandated by standards and accreditation bodies, but also necessary for the promotion of social justice (Villegas, 2007). By enabling pre-service teachers to identify their beliefs, as well as the organizational influence their belief systems have on their

behaviors in the classroom, future teachers may develop instructional practices that effectively promote student access and achievement.

### In-Service Teacher Dispositions

I now discuss in-service teachers, those who are already licensed and educating students. Rooted in the belief that a teacher's disposition is a potent determiner of instructional decisions, Jorgensen, McSheehan, and Sonnenmeier (2007) explored the potential impact of professional development opportunities for special educators and individualized education program (IEP) teams: "It has been theorised that teacher expectations about students' ability to learn—communicated in both explicit and subtle ways—can be more influential on learning outcomes than the students' inherent abilities or the teachers' instructional methods" (Jorgensen et al., 2007, p. 249). Given the influential role of a disposition that presumes student competence, special education teachers were provided continued learning in the form of professional development.

It is dangerous for educators to assume the lack of competence in their learners; such dispositions may negatively impact the individual's learning opportunities and life-long options. Critical to the discussion is the disclaimer regarding the instruction of non-academic skills:

Applying this presumption does not imply that functional life skills are not an important educational goal, but rather, that these skills should be taught at a time and place that does not interfere with instruction in GE curriculum in the GE classroom. (Jorgensen et al., 2007, p. 259)

There is a time and a place for all things, but the classroom is to be a place of equity in learning and access. Instructional objectives are to be aligned with the general education curriculum to afford students opportunity.

Ashton and Webb (1986) note that educators who believed their students possessed little chance of success felt their own sense of competence was threatened.

Ashton and Webb (1986) describe the cyclical and interdependent nature of the disposition:

Teachers' expectations about students' ability appear to be the single most influential student characteristic affecting their behavior. If teachers have low expectations of their students' ability to learn, these low expectations will contribute to a low sense of teacher efficacy and lessened effort in teaching the students they believe to have low ability (p. 14).

Accepting the interdependence described above, further consideration and exploration of a teacher's disposition is supported.

Likewise, Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001) examined the beliefs of in-service teachers and noted the role of teacher efficacy: "By spending more of their time with the more successful students, teachers can convince themselves that those students who are failures are not really their responsibility" (p.680). Educators who distance themselves from struggling students may do so to protect their self-efficacy. Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001) found those educators tend to place responsibility for the lack of progress on families that fail to support the education of their children at home.

Thornton (2006) linked teachers' dispositions with observable behaviors, and found that students are able to distinguish dispositions in their teachers. Educators who embodied dispositions that were valued by their students were described as follows:

These teachers who "acted different" "helped them more, talked to them more, let them work together, trusted them to make decisions," and "expected them to be smart." They "weren't always watching you and telling you what to do." The students felt like they learned more from these teachers. (Thornton, 2006, p. 60)



Student comments included in Thornton's (2006) study describe an educator who values their students' perspectives. The teacher who "acts differently" (p. 60) engages learners and teaches with an expectation of potential.

In order to address disposition, Connor and Bejoian (2006) propose curriculum designed for graduate level educators that uses movies to provide an interdisciplinary examination of disability: "Film is therefore a representational medium for presenting and promoting ideas about what constitutes the human experience. It has a substantial impact on shaping public attitudes toward people with disabilities" (Connor & Bejoian, 2006, p. 53). By preparing in-service teachers for the incorporation of a critical and social examination of disability, across disciplines, in the K-12 setting: "educators cultivate the humanity of all students" (Connor & Bejoian, 2006, p. 59). Curriculum that exposes students, early in the learning process, to the influence of society in the conceptualization of disability lays the foundation for respect and inclusivity.

### Value of Reflection

The power of reflection has been illustrated in many of the research studies referenced in this chapter. Teachers who possess a self-awareness are able to reflect on how their disposition influences their teaching. The development of a disposition that “presumes competence” (Biklen, 2005), or expects learner potential, is tied to the ability of the educator to examine their beliefs and the impact of their instructional practices. Finally, as demonstrated later in the reading, the teacher’s ability to reflect is referenced in the language of teaching standards.

Working with teacher candidates at two institutions, Schussler, Stooksberry and Bercaw (2010) suggest: “the most effective teaching occurs when teachers are aware of how their dispositions manifest across all domains and in a variety of teaching contexts” (p. 352). Schussler et al. (2010) found that teachers who were reflective were able to “unpack their assumptions” (p. 361) and were mindful of their personal beliefs. These “reflective” pre-service teachers reported a balanced sense of responsibility for student achievement. Schussler et al. (2010) conclude that increased reflection can be achieved and may enable pre-service teachers to understand how they interpret their students’ differences and abilities.

Baglieri (2008) distinguishes between “reflection” and “critical reflection”: “In critical reflection people engage in thinking about the nature of their thoughts, the process through which thoughts are formed, and the meanings that their thoughts purport in order to examine or pose possibilities for change” (Baglieri, 2008, p. 590). Participants were

able to express a connection between their past experiences and their understanding of what it means to be disabled.

Baglieri (2008) promoted critical thinking about disability and challenged her graduate level pre-service teachers to rethink the traditional medical model through readings from DSE and critical reflection. Baglieri's (2008) asked participants to summarize literature and generate autobiographical connections to the readings. Baglieri (2008) noted the bridge to understanding is often the teachers' personal experience: "Drawing from common knowledge and experiences with bias is one way that teachers may come to identify, perhaps ally, with persons with disabilities, rather than engaging in othering" (Baglieri, 2008, p. 593). The development of a disposition that moved beyond the assignment of a label to one of engagement was tied to an educator's critical reflection on their beliefs about student potential.

The opportunity for educators to reflect on their personal beliefs, dispositions, or feelings is beneficial. Richert (2002) highlights the value of the teacher narrative, noting that paired teachers were observed clarifying and refining their thoughts: "Both teachers explained that ultimately, sharing those private moments—and the realities of their day to day work—offered them a chance to 'go deeper' in their understanding, and therefore to develop new and richer understandings of their work" (Richert, 2002, p. 60).

Consideration of how a teacher's bias may impact interactions yields valuable educational insights.

Again, the inclusion of reflection in this section illuminates the role of self-reflection in the development of a disposition. In-service and pre-service teachers alike

need to address their belief, assumptions, and attitudes that may construct barriers for students assigned to their classroom. The language of the standards addresses the expectation that teachers identify biases that may impact instructional decisions. Scholarship shared here demonstrates the relationship between dispositions and reflection.

### Criticisms Related to the Study of Dispositions

Contributors to the discourse on teacher dispositions nearly unanimously agree that teachers' actions are the embodiment of their dispositions. However, research centered on teacher dispositions is not without critics. For example, Murray (2007) calls to task the exhaustive list of desired teacher dispositions and questions the practice of creating terminology and specialized language within the profession of education. Murray (2007) also suggests that research may seek to determine who is "entitled to teach" (p. 386). Apprehensions expressed in literature include concerns about the imposition of beliefs, or an imbalanced value of some belief systems over other ideologies.

Acknowledging there are challenges related to the study of disposition does not detract from the rationale that: "dispositions will influence the demonstration of appropriate teacher behaviors and practices and foster learning in all students equitably" (Welch et al., 2010, p. 184-185). Addressing the contention that has existed since the conversation around teacher dispositions gained significant attention in academia during the 1980s and outlining some of the challenges related to investigation of teacher

dispositions, Welch et al. (2010) acknowledge the primary problem of vague and imprecise definitions.

Given the mandate to foster dispositions in pre-service teachers and an identified overlap with values, Welch et al. (2010) explore the relationship between teacher dispositions and values. Results of the study demonstrated teachers articulated the importance of believing their students are capable: “Our results indicate that clinical interns and cooperating teachers in the current study share as one of their top dispositions the belief that ‘all students can learn’”(Welch et al., 2010, p. 198), concluding that although there are challenges to the study of teachers’ dispositions thoughtful research design can address the concerns.

The sum of the challenges do not discredit the impact of a teacher’s disposition. Literature reveals an unchallenged respect for the impact that a teacher’s disposition has on their interactions in the classroom. Even the critics agree that further research regarding the role of disposition is necessary.

### Disability Studies in Education

In this section, I highlight the tenets of Disability Studies in Education (DSE), and discuss an overview of the social model of disability and the “presumption competence” (Biklen, 2005). The phrase, to “presume competence,” utilized by this study is credited to Biklen (2005) and captures a disposition that credits all individuals with the ability to think and a desire to direct their own destinies. Biklen (2005) and DSE suggest the mandate for society, and especially educators, is to “presume competence” and avoid

disabling assumptions based on a learner's communication or cognitive limitations. This assumption is foundational to a belief in the educability and potential of all learners.

But first, I will outline the history and contributions of DSE. Davis (2010) explains the roots of disability studies are founded in a civil rights model which moved the individual with a disability from a person who needed care and pity to a minority status with afforded legal protections. Connor et al. (2008) describe the emergence of the discipline of disability studies, from which DSE stems, in both the USA and the UK at nearly the same time. Although primarily concerned with "the collective experience of marginalized and oppressed people," the lack of a uniformed interpretation of the "social model" (Connor et al., 2008, p. 443) persisted. Nonetheless, the common goals of rejecting the medical model, full access to society, and activism remained unchallenged.

Original members of the special interest group sought to clarify the foundational beliefs and research agenda of DSE. Of primary importance was the understanding that DSE is not synonymous with the current model of special education: "DSE and special education could not be used interchangeably" (Connor, et al., 2008, p. 446). Next, scholars identified the goal of promoting better "understandings of the daily experiences of people with disabilities in schools and universities, throughout contemporary society, across diverse cultures, and within various historical contexts" (Connor, et al., 2008, pp. 441-442). DSE embraces diverse methodologies that include: a social model mentality; the aim of advancing the interests of individuals identified as disabled; the promotion of "social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labelled with disability/disabled people"

(Connor, et al., 2008, p. 448). Finally, DSE scholarship extends an assumption of competence to all people and rejects the deficit-laden medical model.

Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) outline what disability studies is and that it is not equivalent to special education. Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) warn that: “disability studies is not the same as disability rights” (p. 72). The Core Concepts are clarified as: “social,” “foundational,” “interdisciplinary,” “participatory,” and “values-based,” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, pp. 72-75). The challenge is for society, starting with the K-12 curriculum, to reflect and rethink disability: “The project of societal inclusion requires all involved to engage in (rather than avoid) difficult questions about the nature of disability and the practices surrounding the phenomenon of disability” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 75). Engaging in research related to disability, from a DSE perspective, demands attention be given to the impact of society. Social justice must be at the center of investigations that challenge even the youngest of citizens to recognize the value of human difference and promote reflective opportunities for ideological growth across all disciplines.

### Social Model

The social model does not negate the personal experiences of individuals with varying needs, rather it identifies the barriers, constructed by society, within the environment that disable the individual’s full participation. Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) concede: “Most scholars in disability studies readily acknowledge the personal reality of impairments” (p. 73). Rather, literature aligned with DSE examines the context and the interactions within society that contribute to societal beliefs about disability.

Disability is considered to be a construction of society. Society's classification of individuals, based on perceived social values, constructs and imposes identities upon its citizenry.

Feminist and race theorists provide understanding about the role of society in shaping identities and constructing barriers. In feminist theory, we see the influence of culture on sexuality, assigned identity, and physical appearance. Garland-Thomson (2002) employs a feminist framework, with its social orientation, to examine disability: "The emphasis on cure reduces the cultural tolerance for human variation and vulnerability by locating disability in bodies imagined as flawed rather than social systems in need of fixing" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 14). Here, Garland-Thomson (2002) demonstrates the complementary relationship between Disability Studies and Feminism. Acknowledging disability as a social identity, demands contemporary society examine pervasive thoughts and feelings associated with disability that perpetuate isolating and restrictive behaviors.

Dudley-Marling (2004) believes the teacher should ask, "What's going on here?" (p.488) in order to reframe their understanding of disability more holistically. A teacher disposed to think about the social construction of the classroom would start by "assessing the various factors that make up the social context" (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 489), rather than considering disability to be a fixed identity, unrelated to interactions with people and the expectations of the location. Teachers are challenged to recognize the power of interpretation and reject the location of deficit/problem within the student.



The social model is one of the pillars of DSE research and scholarship. The contribution of context, society, and political agendas is acknowledged. The social model necessitates that consideration is given to the subjective interpretation of what is believed to be true. By employing the social model, responsibility of the educator shifts from a focus on a student's perceived deficit to the examination the environment, the interactions in the classroom, and the beliefs of the educator.

### Presumption of Competence

The rejection of the medical model and the assumption of competence are founding principles of DSE (Connor et al., 2008). In order to better understand a disposition that values all students and presumes competence, a closer examination of the origin of this orientation is beneficial. Biklen and Cardinal (1997) build upon the ethnographic work of Rosalind Oppenheim: admonishing educators to not base expectations for their learners' academic growth on their language and communication ability. Biklen and Cardinal (1997) challenge absolutes and quantifiable tests used to define individuals: "Concepts such as independence, ability, and disability are treated as social constructs, not innate, natural facts or truths" (p. 157). The notion that test results define a person is rejected, and the idea that disability is a fixed reality is defied. For the sake of this study, the disposition reflected by the "presumption of competence" (Biklen, 2005) is interchangeable with a teacher's expectation of student potential and equitable participation.

Likewise, Jorgensen (2005) admonishes educators to make the "least dangerous assumption" about their students' abilities and establish high expectations:

the least-dangerous assumption when working with students with significant disabilities is to assume that they are competent and able to learn, because to do otherwise would result in harm such as fewer educational opportunities, inferior literacy instruction, a segregated education, and fewer choices as an adult (p. 5).

The teacher who believes their students are capable—expecting potential--possesses the disposition that presumes competence.

A disposition that presumes competence affords students access to opportunities in the school setting and in post-secondary life. Traditionally, educators and systems of school have demanded students demonstrate competency to be included in the general education classroom. Jorgensen (2005) calls for a different way of thinking about disability and student competence.

Parents, specifically, express the critical role of a teacher's disposition.

Investigating the perspectives of parents with children identified as disabled, West and Pirtle (2014) encountered the potency of special education teachers' dispositions:

*See the potential of children.* Our focus group participants also pointed to the personal characteristics all teachers must possess. 'A great teacher is the teacher that sees the potential of the child' (mother). A common theme was the ability of a teacher to see a child's potential, to believe that all of their students can learn regardless of their disability, and to teach in accordance with that belief. As one mother so eloquently expressed, 'this is a child, not a diagnosis.'"(West & Pirtle, 2014, p. 296-297)

Participating parents valued a disposition that recognized their child as a student who had potential and did not reduce them to an identified disability. Parents expressed a desire for teachers to expect potential.

DSE sets aside absolutes and invites participation of all members of society.

Central to the scholarship of DSE is the understanding that an assumption of competence is afforded to all people. Finally, the tenets and scholarship of DSE acknowledge it is

society that constructs barriers which disable individuals, not inherent attributes of the individual. This underscores a social model conceptualization of disability. Similarly, the language of the teaching standards demonstrates the educator is to expect student potential and progress.

### Teaching Standards

In this section on Teaching Standards, I include language from the standards that demonstrate an expectation of learner potential for pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as the need for teachers to be reflective. I include these different standards established for special education teachers, in-service teachers, and pre-service teachers to provide a layer of understanding regarding expected dispositions. Within the language of the standards are statements that imply and maintain that teachers must demonstrate a “presumption of competence” (Biklen, 2005), or an expectation that all students can learn. Also, the responsibility of the educator to identify personal beliefs or bias that may impact instructional decisions is demonstrated; self-reflection is necessary.

Pre-Service and In-Service teaching standards address teacher quality and desired teacher dispositions. The expectation of potential, or the “presumption of competence” (Biklen, 2005), is reflected in the language of the standards. Such a disposition includes: the educator’s ability to identify their own bias, and, in turn, reshape the expectations they have for students and the educator’s value of each learner’s unique characteristics—and abilities:

Teachers need to recognize that all learners bring to their learning varying experiences, abilities, talents, and prior learning, as well as language, culture, and family and community values that are assets that can be used to promote their learning. To do this effectively, teachers must have a deeper understanding of

their own frames of reference (e.g., culture, gender, language, abilities, ways of knowing), the potential biases in these frames, and their impact on expectations for and relationships with learners and their families. (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 3)

Teachers must identify their beliefs and dispositions to ensure that they presume their learners are competent and design instruction to challenge their students' needs.

The teacher must recognize the diverse nature of their students' development and skills, and they must create safe and empowering environments to accommodate for these variances: "Effective teachers have high expectations for each and every learner and implement developmentally appropriate, challenging learning experience within a variety of learning environments that help all learners meet high standards and reach their full potential" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 8). A disposition that establishes high expectations for all students and presumes student competence is described within the language of teaching standards.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), known for the study and advancement of issues related to disability and exceptionality, has identified professional teaching standards. In the document published by the CEC entitled, *Standards for Professional Practice* (2015), Teaching and Assessment Standard #1.4, special educators are mandated to: "create safe, effective, and culturally responsive learning environments which contribute to fulfillment of needs, stimulation of learning, and realization of positive self-concepts" (CEC, 2015). Additionally, in the CEC's *Code of Ethics* professional special educators are charged with providing stimulating learning experiences for students: "to develop the highest possible learning outcomes and quality

of life potential” (CEC, 2015) for their students. The actions described within the standards represent a disposition of social justice and an expectation of learner potential.

Likewise, Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC, 2013) provides standards for pre-service teachers: “This ‘Common Core’ outlines the principles and foundations of teaching practice that cut across all subject areas and grade levels and that all teachers share” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 3). The pedagogical expectations encompass professional expectations for all pre-service teachers.

Future educators are expected to demonstrate critical dispositions related to the different abilities demonstrated within their classrooms. Specifically, 2(1) states: “The teacher believes that all learners can achieve at high levels and persists in helping each learner reach his/her full potential” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 17). This standard that expects learner potential aligns with the disposition described by the Iowa Administrative Code (2010) and implemented by the Iowa Department of Education (2010).

The Iowa State Board of Education adopted the *Iowa Teaching Standards and Criteria* (Iowa Code 284.3, 2010) in order to assess in-service teachers. At the time of this writing, the Iowa Administrative Code (IAC) continues to use the previously established standards (2010); these criteria are designed to support and evaluate educator effectiveness. The IAC (2010), §281—83.4(3) a (2), includes a reference to a disposition and belief, on the part of the in-service teacher, that all students will be included and instructed: “The teacher sets and communicates high expectations for social, behavioral,

and academic success of all students” (Iowa Administrative Code, 2010, Ch. 83, p.2). Additionally, the criteria related to the teacher’s “competence in planning and preparing for instruction” expects educators to use student data, state standards, district curriculum, and technologies and strategies that promote engagement: [the teacher] “uses student’s developmental needs, backgrounds, and interests in planning for instruction” (Iowa Administrative Code, 2010, Ch. 83, p.2). The standards define effective professional practice, and that practice is built upon dispositions that expect student potential.

These standards reflect the definition described by Villegas (2007) and seek to promote social justice in the classroom. The standards suggest that educators must guard themselves against forming conclusive expectations about student potential. Rather, teachers are expected to design lessons and instruct all of their students with an expectation of potential. In other words, teachers are expected to “presume competence” Biklen (2005).

### Expectation of Potential

The expectation for educational opportunities that expect progress and the participation of all students is articulated in IAC, §281—83.4 (1) a (4), (2010): “The teacher accepts and demonstrates responsibility for creating a classroom culture that supports the learning of every student” (p.1). The legal mandate is fulfilled by the actions of the educator, and the observed actions of the teacher are anchored in the teacher’s disposition.

The relationship between a disposition that expects learners to demonstrate potential and an ability to be reflective is represented by the language of the standards.

Finally, the standards exemplify the intersection identified by this research: a disposition that “presumes competence” (Biklen, 2005) and a disposition that promotes social justice (Villegas, 2007). The desired dispositions align more closely to the framework of DSE and embrace a social model of disability, yet the current model of special education, governed by the standards, continues to rely on the medical model and a stratified delivery system.

### Special Education

Finally, this section devoted to special education includes literature that enables the reader to better understand the influence of the medical model on the current system of education. Kliever and Drake (1998) observe that the employment of the medical model in special education establishes a clinical mindset that segregates students; they challenge the “science of segregation,” (p. 107) crediting its roots in the practice of eugenics. Kliever and Drake (1998) also note challenges of the status quo in education and advancements in communication are often disqualified: “Technical rationalism suggests that better and better professionally designed techniques will develop for the control of difference. Challenges to this manner of control are considered anti-professional and, because professions are purportedly based on science, anti-scientific” (p. 107). These authors see a need to rethink the current model of special education’s reliance on positivistic science.

Special education seeks to diagnose and cure the student in order to better align the student with the expected norm: “Under this conceptual model, with its origins in the age of specialization, the focus of the problems in learning is felt to be within the

individual student” (Sailor, 2008, p. 250). In the school setting, this traditional approach to special education relies on the medical model and typically includes labeling based on the student’s identified disability.

Fitch (2010) proposes that the current model of special education continues to perpetuate segregation based on the medical model: “special education has increasingly served as a way to manage heterogeneity by removing those categorized as ‘laggards,’ the ‘feeble minded,’ and most recently ‘exceptional’ from the mainstream” (Fitch, 2010, p. 17). Citing the three most common pro-labeling arguments used by special educators:

- 1) There is no alternative to formal disability labeling and virtually nothing to be done about informal labeling; both are inevitable and natural.
- 2) The stigma of formal dis-ability labels (“exceptionalities”) stems from myth and personal ignorance; correctly understood, they are actually beneficial and necessary to adequate funding and the equitable distribution of resources.
- 3) The study and application of Labeling deviance theory is, or should be, morally neutral, that is, it should keep facts and values separate. (Fitch, 2010, p. 18)

Fitch (2010) concludes that the rationales offered serve to reinforce the devaluation, and often the segregation, of the student identified.

Charlton (2010) surmises that special education affords: “a badge of inferiority and rule-bound, bureaucratic process of separating and then warehousing millions of young people that the dominant culture has no need for” (p. 155). Charlton (2010) charges the system has a political agenda that alienates individuals with disabilities, reinforcing their “abnormality and inferiority” (p. 157), at the same time enabling the dominant culture to maintain power. Charlton (2010) credits teachers with inculcating the values of society: “through double-speak, misdirection (blame the victim), naturalized inferiority, and legitimated authority” (Charlton, 2010, p. 157). The hope for improved



educational experiences for individuals identified as disabled depends upon a critical examination of the current model of special education.

Seeking to understand the influence that the special education teacher's interpretation has on their students' participation in the general education curriculum, Timberlake (2014) examined the teacher's interpretation of the term "access." Specifically, how teachers understand the expectation of access described by Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA; 2004) is dependent upon their interpretation. Timberlake (2014) also found that special education teachers are regularly engaged in a process of assessing the inherent value of their students' participation in the general education: "Teachers described evaluating what students might gain and lose through their participation in a particular academic activity" (Timberlake, 2014, p. 89). The "cost-benefit decisions" (Timberlake, 2014, p. 89) included the teachers' concerns that the instructional time was wasted. Based on the teachers' perceptions of their students' abilities, students were included in the general education classroom. Timberlake's (2014) participants demonstrated that their interpretation of what was best for their students was highly influential. More work must be done to address the lack of uniform understanding associated with the language of IDEA (2004) regarding access to the general education curriculum. In order to ensure that students, identified as eligible for special education, receive general education content, with access to general education teachers and peers, continued education is needed.

In Timberlake's (2016) noted the "aloneness" and "power" experienced by special education teachers. Participants of her study were able to articulate the expectation of

team planning for the individual student's IEP, but the majority of them noted that they were the sole instructional planner. Teachers described the importance of creating "safe and productive" (Timberlake, 2016, p. 203) classrooms where they frequently described the delivery of "parallel academic content in a special education setting as best" (Timberlake, 2016, p. 203). The ability to make these instructional decisions was afforded the participants by lack of professional collaboration. The lack of collaboration creates a sense of power and authority. Timberlake (2016) noted that the lack of professional input from others: "was seen as a nod to teacher expertise, a recognition of their professional status, and a demonstration of trust in their abilities" (p. 205). Timberlake (2016) concludes that additional educational and collaborative supports are needed for special education teachers.

Taylor (2000) demonstrates the power of the social context and the significant role it plays in how individuals shape their identity: "the more enmeshed one is in disability programs—... full-time special education classes—the more one has to contend with a negative identity" (p. 88). Individuals may not score well on standardized tests, nonetheless they are competent in their "day-to-day life as they experience it" (Taylor, 2000, p. 88), and rather than be identified as disabled the individual should be empowered to construct their own identity. The current model of special education fails to consider the complex attributes of students identified as eligible for special education, relying instead on the medical model and constructing disability based perceived deficits within the individual.

### Medical Model

The medical model is representational of an objectivist mindset: “Objectivists argue that what defines a social problem is the existence of an objective, concretely real, damaging or threatening condition” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 151). Experts in the education profession who mimic the authority of the medical community, conceptualize disability as a fixed-ability and fail to consider the role that society plays in constructing disability.

Proponents of the medical model situate the deficit within the individual and discount the role of society. McKenzie (2013) notes the medical model reduces the individual with a disability to the single attribute of impairment:

Overemphasis on impairment that places it as the central problem of the disabled person’s life that must be treated or rehabilitated as far as possible. This perspective grants excessive power to medical professionals and makes of disability a technical problem rather than a social one. (McKenzie, 2013, p. 371)

Reduction of a complex person to the sole attribute, deemed by society to be deficient, empowers clinicians and absolves society.

Some scholars assert the necessity of the medical model as the first step in planning for a student’s unique needs. Forness and Kavale (2001) value a diagnosis for students specifically identified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or multiple diagnoses that include ADHD. They conclude: “Even post-modernists in special education would have a difficult time defending the proposition that such children at the extreme ends of this continuum are casualties simply of poor environments or sociopolitical construction” (Forness & Kavale, 2001, p. 241), believing that instructional planning without the medical diagnosis is insufficient. This orientation depends upon the

location of deficit within the student and is representational of the current educational model.

Special educators' overreliance on the medical model perpetuates a system that wields the power to socially construct, based on deficits or differences, their students' identities. The beliefs and assumptions that special education teachers have about their students' potential are at the center of their tendencies "to act in ways that give all students access to knowledge" (Villegas, 2007, p. 375). The interviews and observational data collected for this study promote further discussion and investigation into the role of a special education teacher's disposition in the design and implementation of an equitable learning experience for their students.

### Conclusion

In sum, this chapter provides the rationale for an exploration of teacher disposition/s. The included scholarship and teaching standards highlight the need for a disposition rooted in social justice (Villegas, 2007), which is only achieved by "presuming competence" (Biklen, 2005). A teacher's beliefs and assumptions drive their instructional decisions. Even the critics of standardized dispositions agree that the beliefs that teachers hold "predispose" (Katz & Raths, 1985, p. 302) them to behave in particular patterns of behavior.

A "presumption of competence" (Biklen, 2005) and the social model are primary tenets of DSE. The expectation of student potential is much like the "educability of all children" (Villegas, 2007, p. 376) described by the language of teaching standards and captured by a disposition of social justice. The intersection of the principles of DSE, a

disposition of social justice (Villegas, 2007), and Biklen's (2005) "presumption of competence" are foundational to an investigation into the beliefs teachers have about their students' potential.

Teaching standards demand that pre-service and in-service teachers attend to the unique needs of their students, and the mandates reflect a disposition that expects student potential. The development of such a disposition demands the educator identify his or her own biases, beliefs, and assumptions that may promote or negate student achievement. The value of reflection is tied to the development of dispositions.

Finally, the current system of special education relies on the medical model. The reinforcement of segregated settings, alternative curriculums, and the classification of students does not reflect a social model. The autonomy that special education teachers report creates a system where student achievement is tied closely to the disposition of the special education teacher of record. Not only are educational opportunities impacted by the underlying beliefs of the educator, but ultimately post-secondary access to society and personal independence are also at stake.

The literature discussed demonstrates the power of an educator's disposition. Based on special education's reliance on the medical model; the autonomy that special education teachers experience; and the impact of a socially assigned identity of disability, further investigation is needed. Central to this study is an examination of what a special education teacher believes or assumes about their students' potential and the impact those beliefs have on their instructional practices—disposition/s. By understanding the variables that contribute to a special education teacher's disposition, continued education,

collaboration, professional developments, and specific pre-service educational objectives may be established to promote a disposition that promotes social justice, presumes competence, and identifies the role of society in the construction of disability. Now, I turn to the Methodology chapter to demonstrate how I am making a contribution to the literature by conducting my study in this manner.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

In order to gain a better understanding of the influence that a teacher's disposition may have, I have employed qualitative methods and interpretation in this dissertation research. The interviews and observations record the tendencies of action and statements of belief regarding the expectation of student potential. My "hunch" that a teacher's classroom behaviors are influenced by his or her personal beliefs, specifically regarding their students' competence, has been strengthened. Still, I acknowledge that I have applied my own beliefs and experiences to every stage of the research process. I encourage readers to recognize my predisposition. According to Sandberg (2005), my research design reflects an interpretive approach: "It is always an experienced world, that is, a world that is always related to a conscious subject" (p. 43). My interpretation has been shaped by the dynamic shifts in my own understanding about the construction of disability. I discuss here the active role I have had in the design, collection, and interpretation of the research.

First, a reminder of the research questions of this study: (1) what does the special education in-service teacher believe about his or her students' learning potential? (2) How do these beliefs inform practice? And (3) what life experiences or educational training do the in-service teachers attribute to the formation of their professional dispositions? In order to best address these questions, I chose the Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) method which I will now discuss.

### Portraiture

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the methodology of portraiture as a blend of art and science: “systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science...” (p. 3). Rather than crediting herself with the invention of a new methodology, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) celebrates the marriage of art and science dating back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century as: “a methodology that hopes to bridge aesthetics and empiricism and appeal to intellect and emotion, and that seeks to inform and inspire and join the endeavors of documentation, interpretation, and intervention” (p. 7). Based on the shifts in educational research, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) asserts there is value in the methodology of “Portraiture.”

Listening to teachers’ stories illuminates authentic concerns for potential investigation. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) describes her attempt to capture the “voices, perspectives, and wisdom of the actors in school settings” (p. 13). Her desire is to dig deeper, past a description of school effectiveness, to the values and narratives of the teachers who lead and design instruction. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) describes her desire to learn from educators: creating scholarship that is accessible to the lay educator and promoting dialogue and an exchange of ideas.

Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2005) research goals are threefold: (1) “convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective” (p. 6) of her participants, (2) provide participants with a chance to see “a perspective that they had not considered before,” (p. 6) and (3) ensure her participants felt “fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized” (p. 6). The methodology of Portraiture does not seek to objectify participants



and includes a description of the contradictions, complexities, and exchanges between the researcher and the subject.

Portraiture enables the investigator to capture the complexity of the context. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) esteems the paradoxical nature of portraiture: “its ability to embrace contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships” (p. 9). Portraiture enabled me to capture the discrepancies observed during this research study; contradictions are part of humanity and society and contribute to a deeper understanding.

### Interpretive Research Design

I acknowledge my interpretation contributes to the collection and analysis of the data, based on the understanding that “our descriptions are always colored by our specific historical, cultural, ideological, gender-based, and linguistic understanding of reality” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 45). Thus, reality is not objective, but rather subjective.

At the heart of the interpretive approach to research is the notion that the individual is part of society, and the influence of society contributes to the construction of meaning. Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) believe: “such interpretive studies are essential to understanding potentially damaging practices for people with disabilities” (p. 200). Likewise, Gallagher (1998) also argues that the interpretive design may promote scholarship that returns to: “the finest accomplishment of special education, that is, advocacy for the human dignity and civil rights of individuals with exceptionalities” (Gallagher, 1998, p. 500). Portraiture (Lawrence-

Lightfoot, 1983), the specific methodology employed for this study, and the aim of this study align with the interpretive approach.

In this research tradition, the primary investigator acknowledges their impact on the collecting, retelling, and analysis of the data: “The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) concludes: “This is provocative work that can disturb the natural rhythms of social reality and encounter; this is exciting work that can instigate positive and productive change” (p. 12). Interpretive research fulfills the goal of this study: to better understand the impact of a special education teacher’s beliefs about their students’ potential. Mahalia’s, Farrah’s, and Leah’s Portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) contribute to a deeper understanding of how a teacher’s beliefs inform their classroom practices—dispositions—and ultimately negate or promote social justice for their students.

#### Data Procedures

The ethical considerations of this research are based on the statutes and regulations established by the *International Compilation of Human Research Standards* (2017) and employed by the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in the *University of Northern Iowa’s IRB Policies and Procedures* (2017). As the principal investigator, it was my responsibility to ensure that the expectations for protections and safeguards assured for participants—outlined in the above documents—were understood and upheld.

In accordance with the IRB, the participants reviewed consent forms (see Appendix B) that detailed the concept of “informed consent” (Glesne, 2006, p. 132).

Crediting Diener and Crandall (1978), the author suggests that the information provided to participants will ensure they understand the following: “(1) that participation is voluntary, (2) of any aspects of the research that might affect their well-being, and (3) that they may freely choose to stop participation at any point in the study” (Glesne, 2006, p. 132). At the start of each visit, I thanked the participant for her participation and reminded her that she was able to end her participation at any point.

### Data Collection

#### Participant Selection

Upon the approval of my proposal, I began to plan a formal solicitation of participants. However, as I informally shared my interest and need for educators who were willing to engage in research around the construct of dispositions, I soon had a growing list of names of special education teachers. Some of the educators’ names were suggested by former students or family members, others were colleagues, and several suggested their own participation. The generation of a list of potential participants’ names may be referred to as “snowballing” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This natural evolution of a pool of potential participants proved to be beneficial.

As described above, I informally began to “build my pool of informants” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 93). My conversations, in and around school settings, about an interest in exploring teachers’ dispositions aligns with Taylor and Bogdan’s (1998) description of “private settings: checking with friends, relatives, and personal contacts; involving yourself with the community of people you want to study” (p. 93). I emailed the special education teachers who had been suggested as potential participants.

Once I had some expressed interest in my research, I provided potential participants with a summary that highlighted my interest in understanding their current beliefs, dispositions, and practices as in-service special education teachers (see Appendix C). Next, I arranged via email a time to discuss with each participant in person, or phone, the research study and invite their questions, according to *University of Northern Iowa's IRB Policies and Procedures* (2017). Based on the responses I received, I soon had three in-service teachers who were willing to make the time commitment and participate in my study.

Per building principals and superintendents, all three women were able to invite me to observe them teach and have access to their classrooms (see Appendix D). The protection and privacy of each of the districts' students were ensured. I assigned each of my participants a pseudonym and changed the names of the districts, schools, and communities to ensure confidentiality. Any reference to exchanges between teachers and students was further protected by use of pseudonyms for the elementary students and, at times, by changing the gender of the student referenced.

### Criteria

As noted above, I generated a list of potential participants who either personally expressed interest in my research or whose name was provided by a colleague, a teacher candidate, a community member, or a parent. All of the potential participants met my criteria: licensed special education teachers, had taught for a minimum of three years, currently taught in a public school setting (K-12), and at the time of the study provided some of their special education services outside of general education classroom. Finally,

the participants selected were educators who are employed as a Strategist II (Behavior Disorder/Learning Disabilities, Intellectual Disabilities, Physical Disabilities), or licensed under alternative means to serve students who have been identified under these categories. My three participants matched the identified and desired criteria. After consenting to participate in the study, they were assigned the following pseudonyms: Mahalia, Leah, and Farrah.

I did not seek to select participants who were homogeneous, but as the research unfolded there were attributes common to Farrah, Leah, and Mahalia. All three of my participating teachers, without intention, were: female, Caucasian, employed in mid-sized rural schools, and are between the ages of 35 and 55. Finally, each of these women expressed a passion for their career choice as a special education teacher. The degree with which my participating in-service special education teachers share attributes or experiences may contribute to a “homogeneous sampling” and allow for a “collective understanding” (Glesne, 2006, p. 35).

#### Site Selection

Site selections were determined by the three school districts that employed the special education teachers who participated in my study. I was pleased that this afforded me three distinct districts. I offered the participants an opportunity to select the location of the interviews, but I did express a hope that I would be able to observe them in action in the context of their classrooms. All three participants invited me to interview them in their classrooms following observations. I welcomed the opportunity to hold the

interviews in the instructor's classroom. Interviews were arranged to follow instruction and ensure the teachers were alone in their classrooms.

I acknowledge here the concerns expressed by Marshall and Rossman (2011) regarding samples of convenience, such a study: "saves time, money, and effort but at the expense of information and credibility" (p. 111). Nonetheless, I am grateful to have been able to locate participants employed at public schools within driving distance of my home. Given the opportunity, I selected participants from three different districts to enrich my understanding and minimize the effects of a sample of convenience.

Also, the three separate sites provided an additional layer of anonymity for my participants. I described generally the communities, schools, and classrooms to ensure the participants felt confident in expressing their beliefs without fear of recourse or identification. Confidentiality regarding participant identity and location was of paramount concern throughout this research study.

### Interviews

Initially, educators were asked to share a brief narrative regarding their life experiences and their decision to enter the profession of special education. Following the initial conversation, 3 semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted. I was the sole investigator in this research. I secured permission to audio record the conversations and interviews. Later, I transcribed them for analysis. I personally did the transcription, not only as a means of immersion in the data, but also to protect the identity of the participants.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest the potential unfolding of information gained during the interview process: “the first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third joins these two narratives to describe the individual’s essential experience with the phenomenon” (p. 148). The suggested structure was helpful, but flexibility was also employed to support the natural flow of conversation and pursue unanticipated areas of discourse. Although I sought to be purposeful in my question design, often the participants’ responses segued into other topics (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Primarily, the interview questions were designed to be open-ended (see Appendix E). Specific to this interview process was an attempt to avoid what Bogdan and Taylor (1990) refer to as “Does it work?” (p. 186) questions: instead asking questions that sought to dig deeper. My interview questions were not designed to determine what is—or is not—working, but potentially raise consciousness about what meanings are assigned to the students’ identifications and behaviors. I sought to learn more about what the participants believed about their students’ learning potential and the impact of those beliefs.

### Observations and Field Notes

Over a six-week period I observed two of the three participants three times in their respective classrooms. Scheduling did not allow for a second observation for the third participant.

During the observations, I sought to detail the context and interactions of the participating teachers with their students. To aid in my interpretation of the observations,

I recorded my comments and reactions during and after the classroom visits. I had planned to use my laptop, but the need to be more discrete and flexible demanded that I take notes on paper. I included the reflective observer comments to support my analysis process and develop questions for the subsequent interviews. The “analytic notes” or “observer comments” (Glesne, 2006, p. 59) that capture my thoughts and reactions are woven throughout the participants’ portraits in Chapter 4. Not only did the “observer comments” (Glesne, 2006) yield follow-up questions, but also promoted the identification of potential themes and implications.

Glesne (2006) promotes the notion of purposefully reflecting on the notes from the field immediately after the visit. Reflection is a purposeful part of the research process: “This is the time to write down feelings, work out problems, jot down ideas and impressions, clarify earlier interpretations, speculate about what is going on, and make flexible short-and long-term plans for the days to come” (Glesne, 2006, p. 59). The contemplation contributes to the interpretation and analysis of the data.

#### Data Analysis

From the first interview and observation, there is a degree of analysis already taking place. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) assert that the researcher is always analyzing and constructing meaning, even during the collection process, and I found this to be true. In a similar description of data analysis Glesne (2006) states: “Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds” (p. 148). As the analysis of data moves forward, Glesne (2006) discusses the organization of the information: “It is progressive in that you first develop, out of the



data, major code clumps by which to sort the data. Then you code the contents of each major code clump, thereby breaking down the major code into subcodes” (Glesne, 2006, p. 152). With this objective in mind, I began the lengthy process of organizing and analyzing the words and actions of my participants.

As I read and reread the interview data, I found that Glesne’s (2006) assessment of the inclinations of rookie researchers was true of me: “Novice researchers are sometimes tempted to code in very small chunks, separating even clauses of sentences” (Glesne, 2006, p. 154). Initially, I organized my participants’ comments into a document that chronologically identified the themes. However, this approach did not prove helpful. Though the spread sheet looked impressive in its length, breaking down the information into those small chunks did not contribute to my understanding of what my participants believed about student potential. I returned to the proverbial drawing board.

Next, I began to categorize those initial themes based on their relationship to the tenets of Disability Studies in Education (Connor et al., 2008). Additionally, I began to consider how the data collected answered my overarching research questions. While my first-round of extractions yielded 17 pages of themes, the next phase of analysis enabled me to pare down to a one-page overview of my participants’ primary themes related to DSE. Still, I had more work to do.

Once again, Glesne’s (2006) description of the analysis process aligned with my experience. Analysis was not a perfunctory and dry task: “Rather, it is a time when you think with your data, reflecting upon what you have learned, making new connections and gaining new insights, and imagining how the final write-up will appear” (Glesne,

2006, p. 154). As I reread the transcripts, with my research questions providing the organization, I began to see connections and implications. Continued reflection on the data and consideration of how best to organize it for analysis led to my use of “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Portraiture provided not only the organization that I had been seeking, but also Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) aim for qualitative research aligned with my own research goals. I recognized complexities and contradictions in the expressed beliefs and observed practices of the in-service special education teachers. Portraiture made room for such variances. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) reminds her readers that: “Empowering work should be both empathetic and critical, generous and discerning” (p. 26). Change is not birthed out of blind and generous descriptions, devoid of contradictions. Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1986) methodology encouraged me to capture and learn from the complexities and contradictions observed in my participants' classrooms. Portraiture strives to capture the core of the participant and allows for the messiness of humanity.

The decision to organize my data around the research questions and employ Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) methodology were beneficial. Still, the work of analysis was complicated and indirect. As I wrestled with the data analysis, I found I was initially hesitant to assign meaning to the data. Committee members encouraged me to strengthen my implications with quotes from my data. Ultimately, the “interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). The data analysis stage of the research project was

most challenging for me. Moving beyond the quotes and identifying implications required time and reflection.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) acknowledges that in the examination of schools there must be room for inconsistency and contradiction and other imperfections: “The assumption is that no school will ever achieve perfection” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986, p. 14). The three in-service special education teachers provide contradictions, but they are not static creatures functioning in isolation. By seeking to capture the whole person and context, as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986), the portraits that emerge invite candid discussion.

It is my hope that the stories and insights gained from this study will provide an understanding of the role dispositions and beliefs, about competence and disability, play in the classroom: “Interpretivist research can challenge us to think differently about what we already know, to factor in different ways of knowing, different takes on the situation, and different meanings” (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000, p. 181-182). Chapter 4 seeks to capture the context of the conversations and observations in order that you, the reader, may interpret the words and negotiate meaning based on your own experiences. I include the educators’ words, run-on sentences, slang, and inaccuracies to enhance their unique portraits. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) remind readers that portraits seek to capture the knowledge and experience of real people, not objects. These portraits that follow capture the complexities and imperfections that contribute to each woman’s lived experience. In Chapter 5, I discuss the primary themes that emerged from my analysis and the implications that my participants inspired.

## CHAPTER 4

### THREE PORTRAITS

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the three in-service special education teachers from my study using the methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). The data used to create the ensuing portraits are derived from interviews with each participant, as well as the observations of the teachers in their classrooms. During the interview process, each participant explicitly shared life and educational experiences—disposition shaping experiences—which they attribute to their current beliefs and practices. The structure of each portrait is designed to highlight the teacher’s unique beliefs and instructional practices. Each portrait includes a description of the educator’s current teaching assignment, educational experiences, and the length of time in their current role. Additionally, interactions with students and other staff, as well as a brief description of the physical features of the buildings and rooms are included to enhance the readers’ understanding of the context surrounding each participant.

Within each portrait, introductory information is followed by a summary of the participant’s beliefs about their students’ abilities and their profession. Next, the instructional practices observed or described by the teachers are featured. The last component of each portrait is a summary of what the teacher described as disposition shaping experiences. Finally, there is no significance assigned to the order of the portraits: Mahalia, Leah, and Farrah.

### Mahalia's Portrait

I interviewed Mahalia on three occasions. Immediately following her interviews, I observed her teaching math. Mahalia is a white woman between the ages of 35 and 45. She holds a Master Educator License with multiple endorsements. In a written statement about her teaching career, Mahalia views her profession as a vocation. Meeting her students' emotional needs is central to Mahalia's teaching practice. She wants students to recall they were safe, believed in, and cared for while in her classroom.

Mahalia teaches middle school in a rural area. When I walked into her school, I was greeted by the sounds of students laughing and talking as they made their way through the foyer and into the cafeteria. I entered the office and was warmly greeted by the secretary. She told me that Mahalia was expecting me, and I was directed to head up to her room.

Arriving at her room, I found the florescent lights were turned off and in place of them were floor and table lamps. A couch and bookcases were situated on the far side of the room. Tables were grouped in different parts of the room; Mahalia was observed using the seating arrangement to promote student collaboration. Posters with splashes of color provided another layer to the aesthetics. The messages on the posters communicated inspiration, empowerment, and sentiments of encouragement. The walls also showcase student work.

During an interview, Mahalia described her intentional creation of a safe and attractive environment. She said she wants her students to feel comfortable and at home. The physical room arrangement and aesthetics are part of the relationship building that

she so highly values: “I think kids feel pretty comfortable in here, and I am like their security blanket. This is their safe place to go, if they don't understand something.” She cites her honesty and caring as the pillars that undergird her instructional philosophy: “I say words like, ‘I care about you.’ I have expectations for them, and they know that. I do think it is pretty cozy in here.” On more than one occasion, during the interviews, Mahalia said she is not only concerned about her students’ academic achievement, but she also strives to create a welcoming and nurturing environment.

Mahalia had invited me to interview her during her lunch breaks and then observe her teaching the following period. Mahalia used the school-wide study hall setting to deliver specially designed math instruction to a small group of students who qualify for special education services. According to Mahalia, the integrated study hall was designed to ensure that all students had access to the content teachers and strategists regularly. She said the model ensured guided practice was available and data-driven interventions could be executed. As a self-described educational leader in her building, she explained that she was part of the team that introduced the idea of a school-wide study hall. Mahalia said she was excited for me to see the study hall in operation.

During our first conversation, she described her first teaching assignment and the path that lead her to a career in special education: “I actually started off in an inner city school, where I taught for two years in the 4th grade setting.” Mahalia continued by describing her transition to Iowa. Initially, she accepted a position in a private religious school teaching 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Later, she began teaching adult learners: “My mom had worked at a county home in our community, with adults with disabilities. They

were looking for somebody that would teach adult basic skills in the evening one night a week.” Mahalia explained this was her introduction into special education.

Concurrently, Mahalia explored other employment opportunities and a Master’s of Education program: “To be honest I was searching for a public school job. The private school setting gives no benefits. I was looking for benefits in a public school, and this special education job had opened and I applied for it.” She was hired. In 2006, Mahalia began teaching middle school in the public system. She noted that she was underprepared when she began her career as a special education teacher: “I interviewed and got the job here, but with no special education experience except for my one night a week working with adults with disabilities. So, no experience with an individualized education program (IEP) and no idea what specially designed instruction was,” said Mahalia. Education and experience have refined her practices and beliefs.

### Beliefs

When considering what Mahalia believes about her students’ learning potential, several thoughts emerged from her conversations. First, she believes that many factors outside of school impact student achievement. She believes her students are able to achieve post-secondary goals, but she is concerned that her students do not generalize to other settings. Finally, she sees a stigma associated with identification for special education services.

Mahalia recognizes the need for her students to overcome challenges that stem from their home lives, such as poverty. Her expectation for student success is tied to their ability to overcome issues outside of the classroom. She pointed to a student working on

math: “If I had to say based on their work ethic right now... If he...keeps doing as well as he is doing this year, then college is an option, but he has to break a generational cycle of poverty on top of it.” Mahalia repeatedly attributed some of the identified students’ difficulties to their home lives. She credited the home environment as a primary influence in her students’ potential for success.

Mahalia suggested that those students who qualify for programs based on their poverty, like Title 19, have external limits to contend with: “They can't afford the cool jeans or the cool shoes, and so that is why they are not friends with certain kids, because those kids look down on them.” Mahalia summarized her concerns for six students on her roster who have socioeconomic challenges: “I just think that they haven't had the same life experiences, as maybe others, and so that has limited them. I think their home environments are very different.”

Mahalia not only identifies the economic barriers that her students need to overcome, but she believes there are other obstacles her students face: “I have one student who gets dropped off in another town for the weekend, and he just has to find a place to sleep.” Mahalia pondered the intersection of special education and what she described as “at-risk” homes. She shook her head, and she stated again that she could not draw a firm conclusion, but she strongly believes that home lives can negate student success. She said the word, “Home,” again for emphasis.

Mahalia locates no blame within her students, but repeatedly stated that students’ homes influence their success at school. She became emotional as she provided a specific example from her roster: “Lack of structure, and....yeah.... I mean he has a rough past. He



has been taken away from mom, because of additions, and dad is back in his life.”

Mahalia continued to describe the lives of her students outside of school: “All of my students.... two of my students come from divorced homes, but if I think about ‘at-risk’ homes... [She pauses to count.]...three of the four behavior students come from ‘at-risk’ homes.” She defined “at-risk” homes as places, “Where substance abuse problems, problems with the law, and not having stable relationships between parents” exist. To further illustrate the impact of “at-risk” homes, Mahalia provided some additional anecdotal evidence:

I have one situation where mom and dad were divorced. Student lived with mom, mom was making meth and using meth, and kids were taken away by DHS. They went to go live with dad... mom chose them over drugs. The student has completely forgiven mom, but they are very upset with dad, but now mom and dad are back together.

Mahalia employs a definition of “at-risk” that encompasses students who lack supportive home environments.

Mahalia provided another example of a student on her roster who does not receive the emotional support she believes is needed: “Another student, even though he has a two parent home...it is an unsupportive one parent... where mom is parenting the kids and the spouse. So, I worry about that.” In another situation that concerns Mahalia, a sibling is the caretaker of her student. Mahalia expressed a deep concern for all “at-risk” students, not just the students she has on her roster: “I just worry about those kids.” She stated that some students may never achieve academically, due to these external factors. Mahalia suggested it was her intention to encourage her “at-risk” students to believe in themselves. She described the need for special education teachers to have training about

the impact of poverty and “at-risk” homes. Mahalia then added, “I think you have to have a super big heart.” She continued to explain how worried she is about students who lack nurturing outside of school. She said she is committed to helping her students learn to believe in themselves.

Mahalia believes her current students could live independently after high school: “I believe all of them.... can live independently. Do I think they are still going to call mom and dad and ask for help? Or have a roommate? Sure. But I think ... all of them can live independently.” She noted typical supports that most of us enjoy, and she again said she thinks it is realistic to think of her students living independently in adulthood.

Mahalia acknowledged the variance between her students’ post-secondary goals. Her greatest reservations are related to their transitions to post-secondary educational settings: “I worry that a university at this point would be too much for them. They still need the smaller classes,” suggested Mahalia. She also noted that some students set goals that she felt were not reasonable. One example she provided involved a student who has not participated in any sports, but hopes to play professionally: “He wants to be a professional athlete, but he has never gone out for anything.” These concerns have contributed to more school-wide career exploration.

Mahalia and her colleagues sponsored a career day to help students consider possible post-secondary professions. Mahalia suggested narrower employment experiences might actually promote more secure employment for her students. She considered her students’ lack of mobility to be unrelated to their abilities: “I can’t foresee any of my students, this year, moving away from this county or the neighboring

counties.... I don't think they would be a kid who would pack up and leave the state, or pack up or move to another city, or anything.” Mahalia envisions her students will remain close to their community of origin because of personal preference and family ties.

When Mahalia described her reservations about what she considers the “premature exit” of students from her special education program she said, “I am told by the Area Education Agency (AEA) to drop more students than what I feel comfortable with, and I fight to keep them in; because I know they are not generalizing to the general education room.” This sentiment is consistent with other comments Mahalia shared regarding the generalization of skills. As Mahalia described her students’ goal progress, she stressed that she wants to ensure they have the supports they need, but also that they can generalize their learning to other settings. She shared that, regardless of their ability to meet academic benchmarks, she holds out changing goals until they demonstrate to her that they can generalize their skills: “I don't automatically change the goal,” she explained. She asks herself, “Are they able to generalize this, or are they just performing for me in my room?”

Mahalia also explained that her reservations related to exiting students from special education are partially due to the middle school experience. She wants to provide support for her students’ transitions to the high school setting: “High school is such a different ball game than middle school, for any student.... whether IEP or not. So, I may tend to make sure that that a transition is held onto going into high school.” Mahalia stated that she seeks to provide her students with supports that promote mastery. Again, Mahalia’s definition of mastery includes the generalization of skills to other settings; she

looks for this prior to exiting “her kids” from special education services. She acknowledged that such identification for special education services does come with a degree of stigma.

Mahalia described her inclusive study hall as an opportunity to breakdown stereotypes. She said she intentionally addresses issues that may contribute to her students feeling marginalized or stigmatized, but she acknowledged there are still issues: “I think that other kids put stigma on each other,” said Mahalia. She explained that at times students tell each other hurtful things: “That you are an idiot, you have to go down and read with Mrs. J, or you are a retard.” Such comments have contributed to her understanding of the stigma associated with identification for special education. However, Mahalia wrestles internally with how people interpret difference and assign stigma:

I think you are always going to have those jerks [she laughed] who want to shine the light on the differences, like their classmates. But, I want to believe that we, they, are compassionate toward each other, and that it [disability] is not a big deal.

Mahalia puts great hope in the inclusive study hall model and other school interventions: “I do think it has changed a lot, but then also am I being naïve?” Mahalia paused to consider the rhetorical question that she had posed.

When she continued, Mahalia shared that not only do peers assign stigma to one another, but also some teachers assign “stigma” to identified students, those who demonstrate “behaviors” are the most targeted. She stated that the “target on their back” is likened to stigma: “I believe if there are three students walking down the hall and two of them are doing the same thing, but one of them is my student, they [special education

student] are going to be called out first.” Mahalia said she was hesitant to be overly critical, but noted that the described scenario is not uncommon. In her opinion, the fact that a student is identified as eligible for special education contributes to how other staff interpret their behaviors.

Mahalia said she seeks to avoid stigmatizing her students. One way she addresses this is by not talking about their identification: “I struggle. Do we not need to talk about it?” Mahalia asked. Again, this question appeared self-reflective on her part; she did not provide a definitive response. Five years ago she did not employ the language of disability or diagnosis, and she would explain to her students that she was there to help them with the content areas in which they struggled: “Hey, you just struggle in this area of math, and I am here to help you,” she said.

A few years ago, after some of Mahalia’s students had transitioned to high school, some of her students returned and expressed disillusionment and confusion. She was heart-broken when former students shared their hurt and frustration upon learning they had a “disability.” Mahalia recounted the surprise and disillusionment that her students had experienced when their high school special education teacher told them they had “learning disabilities” and were in fact “disabled.” Those students came back to Mahalia and asked her, “Did you know I was disabled?” Mahalia questioned the need to label: “I don't want to shatter somebody's little spirit, by calling him or her disabled, but then I don't know if I am hurting them in the long run, with advocacy.” She concluded, “I don't know the answer to that.” Mahalia said the tension she wrestles with is based on her

desire to protect and nurture her students' and the system's expectation that she identify differences in order to remediate her students.

Although she referenced participation in extracurricular activities as evidence of the overall progress being made in special education, Mahalia admitted that within the education profession there remains bias. As an educator of students who are identified for special education services, she is often devalued: "I think that sometimes people, who are in special education are seen as second-class teachers, because we don't have a content expertise." Hesitant to blanket all of her colleagues with such an attitude toward special education, Mahalia still concluded that such an attitude was "more the norm than not" in the profession as a whole. She said she has considered the root cause for the lack of respect she is at times afforded, but she offered no further explanation.

### Practices

While observing math instruction provided in the study hall setting, and during the multiple interviews I conducted, Mahalia demonstrated and discussed her teaching practices. She identifies herself as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) coach who provides strategies, and she seeks to create a safe and nurturing environment. Overall, Mahalia described her understanding of the system of education as a "balcony view." Her use of this phrase on multiple occasions represented her administrative perspective of how schools and districts function. She expressed an understanding that her classroom was situated within the broader context of the public school system. Finally, she referenced both her successful and not so successful opportunities to co-teach in the general education classroom as a strategist.

Over the course of my visits to Mahalia's classroom she frequently credited her role as a coach as a primary influence in her professional development. As noted above, she shared that she now has a different vantage point and considers the district's needs, not just the immediate classroom, when thinking about education. She said that her educational leadership classes and her MTSS role have changed how she thinks about education: "They tie into looking at schools as a system and not just my little neck of the woods." Being an instructional coach is highly influential in how she views her role as an educator.

For Mahalia, one of the primary focuses of her leadership role is the development of relationships that empower students. She wants to ensure that every student in her building is connected to caring educators: "For kids at the secondary level, relationships feed into motivation." When students know they are cared for they work harder, and Mahalia attributes the access her role provides to her increased ability to take action: "Where I see a kid who is struggling, I can pull them in during my coaching time and work with them. I can be more action based, instead of just really focused on my IEP students." Mahalia continued to describe her hope in the MTSS model. She revisited the power of teaching strategies and differentiating instruction throughout all of our conversations. Repeatedly, she stated that her primary goal was student success.

Mahalia functions both as a coach and a strategist, and she described her split teaching assignment. She appreciates the opportunities that she has been afforded by having this dual assignment. Previously, her AEA had reminded her that she was only to work with the students who were identified for services: "You can't be working with kids

who are not on your roster.” Today, Mahalia celebrates her flexibility: “We are working with these at-risk kids in our coaching time.” She identified this practice as a “grey area” which she considers beneficial: “We get to work with more kids.” Mahalia does not always adhere to the formal plan, but rather seeks to meet the needs of her students.

Mahalia shared that there are ways that she challenges the system, and her approach is not always appreciated by her administration. She provided an example of how she challenges the current education system; she works with her students more than what their IEPs describe. She disregards the paperwork:

It is what they need, and I [also] challenge the system secretly in my coaching role.... I am going to work with kids, even though I am not supposed to, based on what it says in the paperwork, because it is what kids need.

Mahalia attempts to provide all students with the strategies that they need, and she believes any challenge to the system that she initiates is always for her students’ benefit.

In her role as a special education teacher, I observed Mahalia teaching strategies to her students and scaffolding their content material. She identifies with her students who are “out of the box thinkers” recognizing there are many ways to reach a learning outcome, crediting her own divergent thinking as a benefit in her classroom practices: “I am going to get from A to F in a very different way than a lot of other people, and I think that is why I can think on my feet about how to explain it in different ways.”

In conversations about her position in special education, Mahalia assumed responsibility, as a strategist, for bridging the content gaps for her students. She provided examples of questions that she asks herself: “How can I change it [curriculum] again for them to get it? I do think that it is on me first, just that reflective piece, for them to get it.”



Mahalia employed this degree of reflection in every conversation, constantly asking herself what more she can do to better explain content, always reflecting on the best strategies to use for her students.

During a particular math lesson I observed on one of my visits, Mahalia taught her students the strategy of visualization, by using everyday objects, in this case candy bars. After reviewing how the strategy would be employed when reading a book, she explained that the students could use the same strategy to help in math: “we will use visualization to think about fractions.” She explained they could picture the whole candy bar, or parts of it. She proceeded to draw examples on the board. Mahalia regularly embedded strategies into her math lessons. She explicitly taught strategies to her students. She said some students need to be overtly taught what other students can pick up independently.

Mahalia revisited her understanding that her students’ lives outside of school are undesirable, and she wants to provide an alternative experience: “I want my classroom to be very cozy and non-institutionalized...some of my kids come from really crappy homes, like they don't have beds to sleep on.” She explained that relationships and a welcoming space are foundational to her practice: “they are a member of this classroom. I think that is important. I think it is just building the relationship with the kid.” She said students should “come in here and feel comfortable.” She wants to provide the support that she believes her students need: “I like to think of myself as a security blanket for the IEP students, and that this [classroom] is a safe refuge for them.” Mahalia continued to

explain: “They feel safe in here, and they realize they are not going to be judged. If they don't get it, we will just work through it together.” She wants her students feel valued.

Mahalia stated she is building trust and teaching her students how to be good human beings: “It might be [that] we are doing homework, but at the same time there are all these hidden rules of being a human that we are modeling for students.” Mahalia suggested that this hidden curriculum was equally as important as the academic expectations. She is passionate about the need to provide identified students with supportive relationships in the school setting, and Mahalia stressed that a special education teacher needs empathy in order to achieve this goal. She provided further explanation: “I think a piece of empathy would be having a big heart.” She said empathy also involve assuming “good intentions” in her colleagues and students. Mahalia hopes to teach this practice to her students through her actions.

Turning her attention back to the academic needs of her students, Mahalia described how she and her colleagues have tried to address achievement gaps. However, the team consistently struggled to find time in the identified students' schedules to provide scaffolding and re-teaching. Although she raved about her inclusive study hall, she acknowledged problems with embedding the specially designed instruction into the study hall time remain:

We are not consistent with this, because if one person out of our group is missing we don't do it because it is so sequential. If one or two are missing, then it doesn't help, because then one person is always behind. So, it is not as strategic as what I need it to be.

Mahalia discussed other challenges with the delivery of specially designed instruction, either in or out of the general education classroom.

Mahalia prefers the idea of providing specially designed instruction, aligned with the general education curriculum, in her inclusive study hall setting: “Now, if I have them in a pull-out setting for reading or math, I think not a problem, because we are still doing grade-like or grade-level material.” Still, Mahalia is concerned that the study hall model poses a challenge for identified students and reduces her to a tutor helping with homework: “I feel like it is more like I am a homework helper during study hall, but I have trouble...how do you take away their work time for general education, when they still need help on those assignments as well?” She did not offer any conclusive remedies for the instructional challenges.

Mahalia credited herself with having a broader understanding of the system of education as a result of her educational leadership courses. She said that administration lacked knowledge about special education, and she provided an example of a common misunderstanding: “I would hope that we are a service, but I call them my kids. Other people call them my kids, so then is it a placement?” In a pattern that had become familiar, Mahalia jotted down notes during our interviews. Moving on to address another interview question, she shared some of her thoughts about the role of strategists in the general education classroom as co-teachers.

Mahalia acknowledged that the success, or lack of success, in co-teaching situations is often related to the personalities of the teachers involved. She shared an example of a general education math teacher who did not value her role as the strategist: “It was very hard to collaborate with that general education teacher and plans were not always...shared. The kids would come back and tell us that we were teaching it wrong,

when in reality we were just teaching it in a different ways.” Mahalia said she felt misunderstood and underappreciated: “I became...probably like a para in the classroom, and was told that I was just a strategist, and that I didn't have the content knowledge of the classroom. I just felt... not respected.” Mahalia said in instances where her skills and knowledge are not welcomed she defaults to an associate’s role: “I will easily go into para role.” She said she knows she has the education and endorsements to meet the challenge of the other teachers who question her skill set, but she typically finds other ways to meet her students’ needs.

#### Disposition Shaping Experiences

Mahalia’s professional disposition has been impacted by her strong sense of “vocation” or “missionary work,” her experiences with adult education, and her personal educational opportunities. Mahalia described failing a college course and the subsequent “calling” she experienced on a mission trip. The hallmark of Mahalia’s teaching practice is rooted in advice that was shared by a religious leader she met abroad: “Life is about relationships.” According to Mahalia this mandate has shaped her life and instructional practices.

Mahalia also credited her family of origin with influencing her professional life. She said her parents’ work ethic is engrained in her, as well as their compassion for others: “We were poor farmers, but my parents had such a great sense of compassion...just helping anybody that you were supposed to help. So, I think that goes into student needs, like you help them where they are.” In her opinion, her profession of

special education is a vocation: “I think a true vocation is you never know the impact of your actions.” She raised her voice and restated the word “vocation.”

Mahalia had enjoyed providing educational opportunities at a part-time job in an institutional setting. She was humbled by the opportunity to teach individuals who had not had any educational opportunities, and she was struck by the eagerness the adults demonstrated:

There was an individual who always wanted a packet to work on, through the week, and every day he would sit down and do his school work, even though we only had it on Wednesday nights for an hour. It was just very humbling, very humbling.

Mahalia said she believes the experiences she had working with adults who expressed gratitude and a hunger to learn have contributed to her disposition.

Next, Mahalia described the impact of a course assignment in her post-graduate work: “In one of my education leadership classes, we had to write about a leader as a servant.” Mahalia said she has attempted to live out “the call” to meet the needs of others in multiple ways, but for a long time she felt she had missed the mark: “I felt like I really missed this social justice piece, this missionary work that I was so ‘called to do’ in college and high school.” She explained this was her rationale for getting another part-time job in a local nursing home: “I thought I needed to do mission work within my own town.” Ultimately, she realized the power of her role as a special education teacher and educational leader:

My job as a special educator is mission work. I am providing food for those that need it. I am providing a safe environment, a relationship that they may not have. I am helping kids in poverty of spirit, food, and you know... mind, whatever.

Mahalia referenced the sense of vocation she has regarding her profession, on multiple occasions, during the interview process.

Post-graduate course assignments have provided Mahalia the opportunity to consider her motives. Mahalia eventually wrote her ethnography about the impact of her faith, mission work, and vocation. She said she strongly believes in her “life’s mission.” She does not view her profession as “work,” and she concluded that her time in the private religious school helped shape her role as a teacher. Mahalia is motivated by her desire to help her students: “I want them to have an advocate, and I want to be that person on their team, where maybe other people aren’t on their team.” She defined her work as “social justice.”

Mahalia has also been impacted by opportunities to observe a variety of models and approaches to the delivery of special education services. As an adjunct professor for several institutions, she has observed a “fine line” between supportive and enabling behaviors. She said these differences have raised her awareness: “Is this the student’s authentic work? Or am I just giving the student answers?” She challenges pre-service students to also consider these questions.

She instructs future teachers to have respect for varying perspectives: “I do think that there is a piece of empathy and perspective that you can teach.” Mahalia said she frequently teaches Human Relations. The learning objectives for this course allow her to address the power of empathy. Mahalia believes enabling future teachers to think about other people’s perspectives contribute to social justice in the classroom.

Mahalia explained her ultimate goal of fostering social justice: “I am just helping people...I just really want to be part of a seed, or part of the wind, that puts good humans out into the world.” Mahalia said she hopes to help create a better world one person at a time. Mahalia clarified that she sees her profession, or vocation, as an opportunity to help shape better human beings: “It is really just what I am supposed to do. It really is. Yeah, just being a good human. Maybe they [students] will reflect back someday on this positive experience.” She concluded that her greatest hope would be that her students would in turn serve others and remember her with fondness.

In summary, the time spent interviewing and observing Mahalia demonstrated her concern with the lives of her students outside of the classroom. She attributes the challenges her students face to their families and homes. Her primary goal is to meet her students’ social and emotional needs. Mahalia believes in the power of education.

#### Leah’s Portrait

I enjoyed three interviews with Leah and only two classroom observations, due to scheduling issues. Leah is a white woman between the ages of 30 and 40. She holds a Standard License with several endorsements. Leah shared a written statement that celebrated her desire to be a “humanistic teacher” and motivate her students. In the same document, Leah credited insights gained while working in the schools as a paraprofessional, and she noted her passion for continued educational experiences. It is noted that Leah has the least number of years teaching and the fewest post-secondary years of education.

Leah's school, a long rectangular structure, appeared to have been built in the early 1970s. The large windows facing the street were covered with a variety of window dressings. Some windows were covered with a patchwork of construction paper, others displayed student work, and some were covered by blinds. I announced my arrival through the intercom system located in the tiled foyer of the building's entrance.

I found the office area full of activity. Students restlessly moved around as they waited for passes from the secretary, appointments with the principal, and medication from the nurse. Teachers chatted as they passed through the narrow office space to retrieve their mail. When there was an interval, I introduced myself to the secretary. After confirming with Leah, via phone, that I was expected, I was directed up the steep steps at the end of the hallway.

Leah's room was simple. The sun streamed through the cracks in the accordion style blinds. There were groups of students working with a number of adults. Boxes lined the back wall and homemade posters covered the bulletin boards. Leah directed me to find a seat, and I observed her instruction.

She was in the middle of a math lesson with a small group of students. The room arrangement suggested this was the norm, as there were tables and chairs set up in groupings around the room. Two adults were working with four students in the back of the room. Leah was working with two male students at the table near where she had directed me to sit. She overheard one associate in the back of the room introduce the word "denominator" into their discussion. Leah stopped her instruction, and she called across the room to the paraprofessional: "That is why I wanted you to tell me when you



were finished coloring and gluing the fraction flower.” She then directed the students at the back table from where she sat, “I expect it to be neat and readable!” The paraprofessional appeared to be irritated by the redirection and mild reprimand, but she did not respond. Leah further explained to the group at the back of the room that they needed to master the basic lesson, before they learned the specific terms related to fractions.

Shortly thereafter, Leah joined me at the back table to discuss her instructional practices; I assured her that I intended to wait until her students left the room at the end of the period. However, she insisted that she was ready to chat. She explained her preference for small groups in the Pull-Out setting. Leah asserted that most of her students desire this model of instruction, too. She currently has only one student who has openly asked to work in the general education classroom. She has used his request to encourage him to “work his way back.” According to Leah, the young man who wants to be educated in the general education classroom has had a history of misbehaviors. Now, when he is frustrated with a math assignment, she reminds him that he has to work hard without frustration and complaint: “I had to remind him again. Like, you have to work, if you want to make it back in.” She compared this student’s personal preference with the majority of students who prefer small group instruction delivered outside of the general education classroom.

She continued by telling me that she always wanted to be a special education teacher with her own classroom: “I can't imagine being in a different [classroom]. I never wanted a full classroom or a general education classroom.” Leah explained that she began

her career in special education as a paraprofessional, but a friend encouraged her to go back to school to earn a degree. Initially, Leah had some reservations about the practical demands of returning to school: “I didn't know if I had the money... and already working here for 10 years, I wasn't sure if I would get a job.” However, Leah did return to school, and numerous times during her interviews she reminded me that she “loved” her position as a special education teacher.

### Beliefs

Interviews and observations demonstrate Leah's beliefs. She believes that it is unrealistic for her students to master the Iowa Core Essential Elements (EEs; 2015). The EEs are learning outcomes that were first implemented in 2013: “a bridge from the content in the Iowa Core Standards to academic expectations for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” (Iowa Core Essential Elements, 2015, p. 1). Leah expressed her disappointment in the lack of life skill training embedded in the EEs (2015). Initially, she anticipated the EEs (2015) would be better matched with the abilities of her students.

Leah stated during an interview that students with disabilities need functional life skills, and she expressed great disappointment in established academic standards: “I know it worries me, because I was so excited...when the Iowa Core for significant disabilities came out, and then we go to read it. And, it is all still so academic.” Her response was frustration and disbelief: “I am just like, oh, my gosh, are you kidding me?” Leah said she can “squeeze in functional skills,” but she had hoped the EEs (2015) would be more strongly tied to functional behaviors. Leah lamented that time was her greatest

challenge: “I know I can squeeze functional skills in, but it is really hard. It is just the time.” Her solution involves taking time from the content curriculum to teach functional life skills to her students. Leah’s AEA representative has encouraged her to embed the skills into her academic instruction, but she believes the opportunities for such integration are limited: “They [students] have to tell time to the half hour, well yeah okay.... like that is, like, about the only useful one I see on there. I know it sounds horrible, but...it was very frustrating.” Over the course of the three interviews, Leah expressed reservations about her students’ abilities to achieve academic standards.

Iowa Core Essential Elements instruction allows for individualized concept/skill development that moves students toward grade level objectives at their own pace. Students move toward Mastery of the Essential Elements through progressions of these concepts/skills. Leah described the mastery level she has established for her students’ academic progress: “Really mastery for them is like 60%, so that is also another thing I have to remind myself....this is as good as it is going to get, because it is hard. Because, like within a month, they may forget.” Leah said the data is what drives her decision-making, but she is not confident that the data is meaningful for her students: “Always the data...the data.... that is what I always look at, and that is frustrating ‘cause there are some things that feel like a waste of time.” Leah stated that for her students Core expectations are unrealistic. She expressed frustration with the expectations that she sees as impractical. Again, she asserted her solution is embedding functional skills into the students’ curriculum.

Leah communicates her frustrations regarding the academic expectations with the parents and guardians of her students. She explains the challenges based on the students' abilities, and she is affirmed by her belief that many of the parents agree with her:

So, I sort of try to tell them like you know.... like it is hard...it is really hard...because like we are going through this S-L-O-W process to get the decimals down...I know a lot of parents feel that way, too.

Leah believes the parents understand their children's academic problems and trust her to modify and accommodate the content material.

In response to another interview question, Leah referenced her concern with the accountability she is assigned for her students' academic progress. When Leah looks at her students' progress monitoring data, she gets nervous: "Accountability kind of makes you nervous." Leah reassured herself by directing deficit onto her students: "You know part of it is you [the teacher], but then a lot of it is the kid. And it is just scary; sometimes it is just really scary." Leah expressed concern each time she talked about accountability.

Leah offered an example of a student who surprised her with his ability. She recalled being shocked by his ability to tell time: "He was like doing quarter to and quarter after the hour, and I was just like, Wow! I had no idea. I had no idea, because I gave him the pretest thinking, you know we will check this out." She had administered the pre-assessment with an assumption that the student's disability would preclude him from telling time; she was astounded by his ability.

She pointed to a student working nearby and expressed her doubts about the student's potential: "When she does get to high school, how can we stick her in these math classes? How can she make it?" Leah giggled nervously. Leah believes her students

also question the value of academic instruction: “I am sure we are both sitting there thinking, ‘What are we doing this for?’ ...like when we were working on...math, like you know.” She explained that the IEP team, “just kind of talked about how we looked at her future.” Leah candidly expressed her feelings: “This is not beneficial to her.” She was confident in her assessment of her students’ learning potential.

At other times, Leah expressed a degree of uncertainty about the assumptions made by IEP teams. Again, she referenced the student working at a nearby table:

I know that it is not supposed to be 100% on their deficits or anything, but that really is a huge role in our decision-making. I know that is probably not the best, but I just can't picture her you know...

Leah’s voice trailed off, and she paused for a minute. When she continued to address the particular student’s post-secondary options, she said the student could, “possibly do a little bit of some sort of training,” after high school, or as part of her high school experience. Leah recalled her response to the student’s post-secondary goal to be a housekeeper at a local hotel: “I thought that would be really good for her.” Leah was relieved to learn the student’s expectations were “legitimate.”

Leah discussed other post-secondary job opportunities for her students. In her opinion, some employment opportunities are better aligned to her students’ potential than others. She cited one student’s goal of working as a mechanic after graduation: “My 8th grader... his dad is a mechanic. He welds. He was talking about, you know, ‘I want to weld someday or be a mechanic,’ ...that was totally doable.” Likewise, she did not question the post-secondary goal of her student who wants to work construction: “It is with his hands, and I mean why not?” Manual labor or jobs that would be supported by

family were acceptable in Leah's opinion. She believed these goals were "legit" and "doable" for her students. In response to other interview questions, Leah indicated that many students had goals that were unrealistic. Overall, she expressed concerns for her students' futures.

Concerns for her students' post-secondary futures are tied to the stigma Leah believes is assigned by society. She provided a personal family example to illustrate this point. Leah's aunt's wallet was stolen, and her assumption was that another patron at the post office, a disabled man, was the thief. Leah reacted with passionate surprise:

Why would you accuse him? Like, he probably wouldn't even know... 'Oh, that is a wallet?' I would suspect a sneaky teenager, or something stealing it...you know...So, I worry about that with that stigma in the small town, and I don't want people treating them badly.

Leah said the example of her aunt is one of many she is aware of that demonstrates that individuals who are considered disabled are treated differently, and she is worried about how these attitudes will impact her students' futures.

During the same interview, Leah expressed that small town life enabled her, as the special education teacher, to better understand her students' needs. She likes that she knows families and their histories. Leah said that life in the small rural community means she is aware that some of her students have a formal diagnosis. Other students, who she suspects would be identified on the Spectrum, lack the formal diagnosis. Leah described a student she suspects would benefit from a diagnosis: "She has a lot of tendencies. She has got to be on the Spectrum. Her mom has not gotten her tested or anything. She talked about it last year." Leah explained that the family recently took their child to be assessed,

and she is eagerly awaiting the diagnosis; however, she assured me that she instinctively knows what she needs to do for the student.

Leah informs other teachers in the school setting of the accommodations that are needed for her students:

I know she is [Autistic], so I just know in my mind what I need to do. I tell people to stay back a little bit, don't get too close to her, give them a picture, use short words...you know it would just help if we knew exactly.

The medical diagnosis is the starting point for Leah's instructional planning. Leah described the benefits of an "exact" diagnosis. Although she expressed total confidence in her ability to "internally" know what to do, she desired a medical diagnosis.

When a student with bi-polar was added to Leah's roster, she asked an expert on behavior issues to help her understand his diagnosis. Likewise, when she learned she would have a student in her class who was identified as having Down syndrome, she credited herself with reading about the medical condition. She reads about the disabilities represented in her classroom; however, she did not specifically elaborate on how the information gained influenced her instructional design.

Leah prefers to employ labels and rely on medical diagnoses, so she does not have to rely on her imagination:

I think it helps. I feel bad. I know everybody has the right to not say it, and everything, but it just helps. Like, otherwise I have to use my imagination of what I think, and I would rather not do that.

Earlier in the interview, Leah noted her innate understanding of how to accommodate and modify for her students' needs, regardless of a formal diagnosis. Here, she indicated her preference for a diagnosis.

Leah expressed surprise while describing one of her students. The student, who was presenting memory loss issues, was unable to do the work: “She can forget things so quick, and at first I thought it was like a game. You know? I was like, what on earth?” Leah said she struggled with the inconsistency demonstrated by the student’s math skills. She asked her paraprofessional to relieve her in the middle of a lesson:

She had us both just like really frustrated, and so I couldn't continue. I had her [paraprofessional] try it, so I am not going crazy or anything...Is she really doing this? Is she really not knowing how to add  $8+1$ ?

Leah said that at times she has to take a break, when she feels she is not making progress with her students: “It is times like that I need the patience, because like sometimes I have to step away.” At times like that, Leah said she admits she is “not being effective.” Leah admitted that, at times, she struggles to know what to do for her students.

During another interview, she shared an example of a transition IEP assessment. Initially, the experience caused her concern and discomfort, but Leah was struck by the student’s self-perception. The student did not identify the barriers or concerns that Leah had anticipated. To Leah’s surprise, the student seemed to have a fairly positive sense of self and optimistic outlook. Leah dismissed her concerns for the student’s post-secondary goals: “So, well, maybe I shouldn't worry too much about it.” However, during other interviews, Leah’s concerns for her students’ futures remained a topic of conversation.

In response to an interview question Leah stated she uses humor to build relationships and create a welcoming classroom environment. I observed Leah’s approach to relationship building with her students did include humor and banter, but at times the exchanges appeared disrespectful and sarcastic. During an observation, Leah



teased a student that she would inform her parents of her misbehaviors. The young lady laughed in response to Leah's comments. Leah then yelled to another adult across the room, "That girl is so crazy funny!" The student was still in the room, and she again laughed at Leah's comments. Leah turned and informed me, "She is my first Downs." Another student was working nearby with a different adult. Leah did not seem concerned about expressing her thoughts in front of staff or students.

Leah said she regularly shares personal information with her students and openly expresses her care for them to build relationships: "I think just little things, like, I tell them some of my personal stuff... I talk about my dogs, talk about my family, and stuff like that." Leah said she wants her students to know she cares for them, but she does not approach or speak to her students outside of her classroom. She bases this practice on her interpretation of their feelings: "I know that as a teenager you don't want your teachers to come up and be like...Hi, how's it going?" Leah concluded that she purposefully engages with students to promote a positive working relationship.

#### Practices

According to the Iowa Department of Education, Pull-Out services are intended to deliver specially designed instruction that cannot be provided in the general education classroom, but the alternative special education setting is not anticipated to supersede instruction in the general education classroom. During my observations, Leah delivered all of her instruction in an alternative classroom setting. She repeatedly stated her preference for teaching in a segregated special education classroom and she said she currently teaches exclusively a separate setting. Leah demonstrated a high degree of

scaffolding and provided a great deal of support for her students; all lessons were conducted in small groups and included her breaking skills and tasks down for the students.

Leah shared some thoughts about the curriculum and assessment expectations established by the Department of Education for her students. Based on her belief that many of the academic expectations are not suitable for her students, she “squeezes” and “sneaks in the functional life skills that she believes they need. During each visit, I observed Leah’s practice of working with her students in small groups where she referenced practical skills. She said she struggles to find ways to make the standards practical. She concluded that there is a need to include the functional skills that promote her students’ independence, but she said she struggles to find the time: “And when do I fit them in?” Leah tries to find the time to “squeeze” in the practical life skills: “It is all still so academic...I know. I can squeeze functional skills in, but it is really hard. It is just the time.” She acknowledged the difficulty she faces is related to her time constraints.

Teaching in small groups outside of the general education classroom is what appeals most to Leah. She explained to me that, likewise, parents often want their child educated in her special education classroom. Leah frequently hears parents say: “No, no I want them in with you,” when the suggestion of working in the general education classroom is made. To further illustrate her position on the Pull-Out delivery model, she provided an example of a student who failed when she was included in the general education classroom. According to Leah, this illustrates the value of the separate special education classroom setting.

When provided data by her district administrators that demonstrated that inclusive practices promote academic achievement, Leah was skeptical. She disagreed with the data and asserted that a Pull-Out model is beneficial for her “lower” students. Leah said she is constantly told that special educators should be “pushing in” to the general education classroom and teaching them, “Core, core, core!” Leah doesn’t buy it: “I don’t know, she [her principal] was saying that there is some data that showed that actually when we pull the kids out ...they lose so much.” Leah made it clear that she does not trust the data that she was shown. Her personal experiences and preference have led her to believe that the Pull-Out service model is superior, but she is aware that the Pull-Out model is losing favor in many school systems, including her own.

During her interviews, Leah frequently expressed total satisfaction with the arrangement she currently had of teaching in her own classroom. She believes this model of instruction was best aligned with her own cognitive skills and interests: “I feel like that is the way my brain works.” Leah continued to describe how she thinks her brain works, and her practice of accommodating and modifying general education curriculum materials: “I think it is fun. I enjoy modifying tests... I think it is fun to try to figure out.” Leah enjoys identifying modifications or accommodations for her students, and she was clear about her desire to provide these services in her own classroom setting.

Leah verbalized concerns about the degree of accountability she experiences as a special education teacher; she struggles to understand how she can be expected to ensure student progress. Leah candidly shared her concerns about IEP goal writing expectations. Her initial reaction to grade level expectations was that they were completely unrealistic:

“That was really, literally, the stupidest thing I have ever seen in my life.” She did not understand, or agree with, the rationale of basing her students’ goals on the academic standards established for their non-identified peers. According to Leah, she was relieved when the AEA eventually changed their approach to goal writing, but Leah said there remains “fear of accountability,” on her part, for her students’ academic progress and levels of proficiency.

Leah further discussed IEPs, specifically plans that maintain the same goals from year to year: “I feel bad because they are the easiest IEPs to write and then the hardest to discuss at the meeting.” It is hard for families to see their children fail to make significant academic progress from year to year. Leah tries to offer parents and guardians hope with opportunities like summer school, but the students who are not making academic progress were the primary reason Leah cited for her concerns about accountability.

Leah coupled her concerns about accountability with esteem for her personal success as a special education teacher. She based her beliefs on the fact her practices include functional life skills. Leah frequently referenced her practice of working to “squeeze functional skills” into her classroom. She tries to find time for the skills that she perceives her students will need to succeed in their post-secondary lives. She reported an innate “understanding of her students’ needs.” Leah provided the short list of skills that she has found in the EEs that have functional value for her students: counting money, cutting foods, and telling time.

### Disposition Shaping Experiences

Over the course of three interviews and two observations, several concepts emerged regarding the impact of Leah's life experiences and training on her current professional disposition. Leah described her pre-service learning experiences versus the realities she faces in her profession. Additionally, she addressed her co-teaching experiences and her years as a paraprofessional. Leah's initial interest in special education was, in part, due to her mother's respite care. She attributed both work as a paraprofessional and respite care experiences with developing her particular curiosity about Autism. She credited all of these experiences with influencing her as a teacher.

Leah singled out a special education teacher, who she worked for as a paraprofessional, with influencing her beliefs and disposition. According to Leah, this educator influenced her understanding of student expectations and achievement:

I learned from that teacher that I worked with. She said, 'Always think that they can.' Yeah, and so that has stayed with me for-EVER! Never think they can't do, always think yes, they can do it. That has always stuck with me.

Leah stated that she strives to believe in her students' potential: "I always try to think about that. Like, you know [I] at least try." On more than one occasion, Leah credited this sentiment as a critical belief that has influenced her disposition and practice.

Leah described herself: "a non-traditional, because...I was 30 when I went back to school. So, I was definitely a non-traditional student." Leah described her recently completed education experience. According to Leah, an area of deficit in her pre-service education was instruction about advocacy. She was not prepared to advocate with the general education teachers regarding IEP planning and implementation. She envisioned

having the authority of the law without any challenges: “Dude, nobody tells you in college the fight that you have to put up. I am like, why do they not tell you that? It is horrible.” She referenced particular teachers that she has had to “go rounds with” to ensure her plans for her students are followed. She then preceded to describe the compromises, to the established IEPs, that she makes in order to maintain relationships with her teaching peers: “There are some things that I just had to say, ‘okay fine.’ I felt horrible, because it is going against the IEP ...but that also kind of helped me build that relationship with the teachers.” Her description of advocacy included a give and take between her and the general education teachers. Leah has been impacted by the contradictions she has observed between her pre-service preparation and the realities of the school system. She said that co-teaching is another area that, in reality, differs from the model described by her professors.

During her career, Leah has had limited opportunities to co-teach. When she has taught in the general education classroom, she has not felt “included” by the general education teachers and often has been “treated like a para.” She described the experiences:

You really feel like more of a para, like a para in the room. It is hard. Those teachers are sometimes very...standoffish, like they don't want to help... they don't want to give up that control. So, I feel bad for the other level 1 teachers. I think they feel like a para.... it has got to be boring. I do not like doing that. Yeah, like I need to be creating or something...Otherwise, I feel like I would just be a waste... to be honest.

Leah laughed, as she further described the idea of co-teaching as a “waste of time.” She believes that the students share her feelings.

Leah lamented: “So, yeah, even with co-teaching, like we...they try to call it co-teaching, but it is not true co-teaching.” She said when pushed into the general education classroom she is reduced to a paraprofessional: “I am para then, because it is not like you are really co-teaching. It is not like...you are really doing anything other than you know.... listening to instruction. It is kind of boring.” Leah said she fears the future of her profession is more “push-in” instruction, and she hopes that she will not be forced to co-teach in the general education classroom. If that time comes, Leah plans to seek employment in a segregated school setting.

Leah has no intention of returning to the role of an associate: “I actually worked in special education as a para, actually, here [indicating building] for 10 years, before becoming a teacher.” She made a clear distinction between herself and the paraprofessionals who work for her. Reflecting out loud, she questioned her feelings, personality, and sense of responsibility:

I don't know if it is a control thing, it might be, but I know some teachers have let paras modify, accommodate... I am the sole provider for those materials and for those things. That is my job! So, I get very uncomfortable, if they take it under their wing and do it.

She leaned in closer to me and raised her voice, “No, no, no!” Leah said she makes her feelings known when others try to usurp her role as the special education teacher.

Although Leah’s career in education began in the role of paraprofessional, she expressed frustrations with the associates assigned to her classroom. She provided an example for me of a paraprofessional who gave her “too much” information:

I have one para who just tells me every little detail about social studies, science and exploratory classes. Finally, one day I said, ‘Like, look, I am not trying to be rude, but I am like I don't care about those classes. I am trying to get these guys to

read and write and add.’ and I just looked at her. I need to concentrate on language arts and math with them. Those things do not mean that much to me.

Leah said she felt badly about the exchange, but it was necessary for her to make it clear who was directing the IEP and what information was essential. She told the paraprofessional, “If I wanted to know, I’d ask.” Leah asserted that she enjoys controlling the classroom environment and is not interested in functioning as a paraprofessional. As we concluded our time together, Leah left me with the clear understanding that “her brain works best” when she is creating and implementing specially designed instruction in “her own” classroom setting.

In summary, Leah describes herself as someone who is not cut out for the inclusive model. Her passion is modifying curriculum for students who are identified with more significant needs. She embeds functional skills into the curriculum, which she believes is too academic for her student population. Overall, she designs and delivers instruction based on the students’ identified disabilities.

#### Farrah’s Portrait

Finally, we turn to the last portrait, Farrah. She has the most years of experience as a special education teacher among the three teachers in this study, and she credits her family of origin as shaping her passion for education and advocacy. I observed Farrah teaching, or co-teaching, on three occasions and followed each observation with an interview.

Farrah is a white woman in her mid-fifties. She holds a Master Educator License with many endorsements. She teaches high school. When Farrah emailed her personal teaching philosophy to me, she included the statement that she had written as an



undergraduate, but she concluded with her current philosophy which she described as “more like a mission statement.” Farrah’s mission includes a plan to support, educate, and empower her students and their families: “to make choices for their future that produces individualized and positive outcomes.” Farrah wants to ensure her students achieve their goals.

On my first visit to Farrah, I noted that the grounds and building complex where she teaches were well-manicured and attractive. A large sports mascot stood proudly near the main entrance. Just inside the doorway the halls were lined with showcases that housed trophies and photographs of teams. In the office, a student ambassador greeted me and informed Farrah of my arrival. A paraprofessional, who worked in Farrah’s room, then arrived and escorted me through the maze of halls that led to the rooms that make up Farrah’s classroom.

Farrah’s room was a hub of student activity. Farrah and a group of students were watching a video they planned to use for an up-coming rally. The rally they were planning was part of the, “End the R Word” campaign, the national campaign that seeks to eradicate the use of the word “retard” or “retarded” as an adjective for people. Students discussed with one another the itinerary, finalized the order of events, took the T-shirts they had designed to wear to on the day of the rally, and then moved to other activities within the room. Farrah turned and greeted me. She offered details about the campaign her students were undertaking to better educate not only the student body, but also the community at large about the misuse of the term “retardation.”

Farrah took me on a brief tour. She showed me the room where she co-taught, as well as the different rooms that opened into one another forming her classroom. As we moved around the rooms, she stopped to answer student questions and direct paraprofessionals. Overall, the atmosphere appeared to be upbeat, productive, and engaging. There were a variety of activities and instruction taking place within the rooms. During this brief introduction, Farrah's "passion" for advocacy became evident. She informed me promptly of her background:

I was born into a family that had special education needs, and I know no different. But, it is also why I do what I do, and it is also why I have the passion to do it, because I was the sister who sat on a school bus and watched my older brother get teased.

Farrah's family of origin has been very influential in her career choice and activism for individuals who are identified as disabled. Farrah's description of her profession in special education and her very identity are intertwined: "This is what I want, this is what I am, this is what I was born to do."

### Beliefs

Farrah sets "high expectations" for her students' learning outcomes, and she believes her students are capable of greater post-secondary outcomes than are typically expected. Finally, she believes assigning labels to students may provide a place for conversations to begin, but she also feels that the use of labels and diagnoses are stigmatizing. She believes her role as a special education teacher includes advocacy.

When establishing the high expectations, Farrah starts with her students' strengths and abilities: "I like to look at people's abilities." Farrah made it clear that she does not restrict "high expectations" to academic progress alone. She wants to narrow the

academic “achievement gap” demonstrated by her students, but she thinks holistically about her students. All of her preparatory work has focused exclusively on the academic achievement gap: “When I have taken classes, it has been; how can we narrow that achievement gap?” Farrah reflected on supports that she can offer to “narrow the achievement gap,” but she also noted “achievement isn't just academic.” She thinks special education planning needs to better address post-secondary living, working, and social lives: “In the field of special education, everything is so focused on what can you do to help these students that struggle, you know?” Farrah challenged the limited conceptualization: “Achievement to me is the work piece; it is the living in society. It is having a job.... a competitively paid wage with other peers that don't have that identification of a disability.” Farrah establishes high expectations by promoting her students’ independence and limiting support staff in her classroom. Farrah’s beliefs about student independence are pillars that undergird her high expectations for her students’ post-secondary living, learning, and working success.

Farrah explained that many of her students would benefit from more options in their post-secondary planning. Educators have to conceive a broader variety of living, learning, and working choices. She held up one student as an exemplar for possible post-secondary educational opportunities. Farrah described a program at a mid-western university that provides post-secondary learning opportunities specifically for students who have academic or behavioral needs addressed by an IEP. One of her recent graduates is currently enrolled at the university, and he will soon be given an internship. Farrah said she believes the former student, as well as the current student she was referencing, could

both be competitively employed. Farrah believes students need to have many opportunities to promote independence and success after high school.

Farrah described what she envisions and desires for students after high school. Her vision includes a variety of the post-secondary living options. She outlined the steps a former Special Olympic athlete, who she had worked with the prior year, followed to move from a supported environment to independent living, and she concluded: “I just heard that she is moving into an apartment all on her own. So, see the steps. That is what I want to see.” Farrah described the post-secondary living options she believes her students are entitled to and capable of achieving: “My ultimate idealistic world would be that they are living in apartment complexes with people their age. They are living a life like other adults... Whatever way they plan their day.” Farrah expressed that part of her plan to support student success includes an understanding of what individuals need. According to Farrah, identification of potential barriers within society, as well as the identification of needed supports contribute to their independence.

She affirmed that all people have needs that they must address in order to achieve their personal goals. For her students, she suggested that part of the team’s discussion about post-secondary living, learning, and working options may include disability identification and labels. Farrah acknowledged labels can provide a starting place for team members in the initial discussion and planning stages, but she believes there are drawbacks to relying on labels as a means of identification. The first day I walked into Farrah’s room I found her working to eradicate labels that create stigma for individuals. She denounced the broad application of labels for individuals identified as eligible for

special education, and she said all people are more than a label. However, she acknowledged that, given the limited understanding of disability in society, labels can provide a common meeting ground for discussions: “Labels are a place to start. You know? But, I don't like the term mental retardation. I don't even like the term, intellectual disabilities.” Farrah has strong opinions about the use of language that separates people. Although she concluded that common language is helpful, she personally dislikes the terms frequently employed.

Farrah focuses on her students’ abilities. She challenges society’s emphasis on deficits. Farrah prefers to consider a student’s current level of performance as the starting place: “I like to look at people's abilities, and I wish the rest of society and world would do that, but they are not. They are not there yet.” Farrah continued to explain her opinions about the appropriate and limited use of labels, as well as her frustrations with the misuse and misunderstanding of labels and identification:

I used to have teachers say, ‘I don't want to put so and so in there he is too high functioning.’ It is like, No! There is no high or low functioning. Those are not words. I mean, yes, we have to identify and label for a purposes of giving kids the most appropriate and least restrictive environment education. We don't have to talk about it freely amongst other people, other than ourselves or our colleagues, to make sense out of where people should be to get their best education, their most appropriate education.

Farrah said there is a great deal of misunderstanding about special education language; students are not easily defined by labels or medical diagnoses.

Farrah guards against misconceptions frequently associated with her classroom and the stigma associated with the identification of eligibility for special education services; narrow thinking contributes to the students’ stigma. Farrah was animated when

she recalled the words of a school counselor who thought of disability as something to be pitied. Farrah promptly educated the counselor about her errant thinking: “My kids have no bad things going on in their life.” Farrah attributed this misunderstanding of disability to society’s perception of people with different needs.

Farrah believes that society assigns stigma. Society has lower expectations for students who have more visible disabilities, while students who “look like a typical-average teenager” are more stigmatized:

I think the students who have more significant disabilities, some of the things that they say or do, is more acceptable.... or expected. I am not saying this is right, but I think that society sees that is okay. ‘She has a syndrome or he has a syndrome, he has severe disabilities.’ The kids that look like a typical-average teenager are the ones that get picked on and bullied more.

Farrah denounced the practice of limiting expectations based on physical appearance.

Farrah expressed many ideas about how schools could be restructured to better meet all students’ needs. She challenged the system of schooling to find balance and avoid extreme solutions. Ultimately, Farrah wants to see schools that are less focused on the labels and more concerned about the level of performance. Farrah proposed that students have more choice and flexibility in their support services. She believes that empowering students to identify when and how they get additional help would reduce the sense of stigma associated with special education: “What would happen is that students would come out of their own free will? What if they would not be put into a class period, where they are forced...?” Although the much needed reorganization would be taxing for our established school systems, Farrah is confident that all students would benefit from the redesign: “It is kind of the whole Montessori...Let's do Montessori everywhere.... let

Montessori be the norm. [Farrah laughed] All the way through high school...even college.... wouldn't that be interesting!" Farrah placed the responsibility for change upon school systems, and ultimately society. If schools were designed to meet students' needs, she feels stigma for all students would be reduced. Deconstruction of barriers and reduction of stigma are not the only thoughts that Farrah shared about school systems and society.

Farrah's practices are designed to promote "unification" of all students and remove the stigma associated with eligibility for special education. She is frustrated by the idea that "inclusion" is an educational, not societal, term and practice. She expressed her desire to see continued changes in the way schools and society function:

I think of 'inclusive' as a school term ...because where do you see 'inclusive' ...other than in schools? Like, where do you hear that term? I always say that we [schools] are a fabricated world. What happens after high school? They all go to their separate environments.... their separate communities, their separate towns. This is the place where they get it. They are not getting it out there in society.

Farrah concluded that the inclusivity of the classroom, or school building, is not reproduced very well outside of the schoolhouse walls.

Parents often seek to delay graduation, even if the student has achieved his or her IEP goals and met requirements. She described her reaction to typical parent concerns at senior year IEP meetings: "Until they are in the real world, this is only a fabricated practice place. So, it is a catch 22." Parents frequently tell Farrah that they are uncomfortable and worried about the end of schooling and entrance to the "real world" for their child. She attributes this sentiment to the following: "The parents know what the real world is like, and they are afraid to let their.... especially their student with

significant disabilities graduate. And, I am saying the best place to practice is in the real world.” She does not support the idea of harboring her students in a “fabricated setting.”

Farrah believes we need to challenge society and better understand that schools are a “fabricated” model. She teaches them with the expectation of independence: “You give them every single thing you can, while they are in school, and then they leave this fabricated high school world, and they go into the real world, and it is not nice.” Farrah is frustrated with the limited employment, housing, and independent activities available for her family members and former students. She is disappointed that society supports a limited standard for individuals identified as disabled. She concluded with a comment about her siblings’ limited opportunities: “They are safe, and they are cared for. Are things the way that I would like them to be, idealistically? No.” Farrah challenges the acceptance of care giving and seeks equality for all people.

#### Pr actices

Farrah demonstrated a high degree of energy and positivity in her interactions with students and colleagues. She was observed motivating students and reinforcing her high expectations with praise. She fostered authentic peer relations through unified programs, classes, and activities. Finally, her practices demonstrated a sense of personal accountability and a passion for advocacy.

Farrah reinforced and motivated her students with praise and redirection, not punishment or negative comments. Farrah explicitly stated her belief in creating a positive work environment with incentives and authentic praise to scaffold her high expectations. A positive classroom culture is a by-product of her personal teaching



philosophy: “Praise them when they are doing what they need to do, not criticize them for their mistakes. It makes all the difference.” When she caught a young man doing his assigned task well she praised him: “I like how you are working on that project.” Farrah described her approach to redirection and classroom management as “positive.” She was purposeful in “catching” the students doing what was expected and praising them for that specific behavior.

Farah’s positive interactions with students contributed to her overall classroom culture. Students appeared genuinely engaged with one another and their individualized learning goals. There was an atmosphere of hospitality and comfort. Over the course of my observations, I did not see any student removed from the setting for misbehavior or withdrawn. The students seemed to be managing themselves with little, or no external prompts. The observations affirmed that Farrah had established a positive student-centered environment.

Farah works to ensure her students know she is approachable and available, and she uses natural conflicts to help students develop their own problem-solving skills. She encourages students to discuss conflicts, and she seeks to help students resolve interpersonal issues at the classroom level. Farrah believes good communication is part of the process: “Once people are listened to... it seems like a lot of times that will deescalate the problem. If there is an issue that has to be resolved, we take the steps to resolve it, if it is possible.” She respects that some issues need to go on to the principal’s office, but her goal is to teach and support conflict resolution and independence. Farrah is hopeful that

these practices will not only positively impact the students' progress toward independence, but that the skills will also foster genuine peer relationships.

Farrah addressed the need for all students to have friends and be connected to their school and peer group. She purposes to enhance peer relations and reduce stigma through her instruction, activities, and relationship building opportunities. Specifically, she highlighted programs she has designed to sponsor: peer collaboration, peer relations, peer interactions, unified Special Olympics, and social skills instruction.

Farrah created a program that invites non-identified peers into the classroom to teach and learn with her students. According to her, what started with a student visiting her grandmother, who worked in the classroom as a paraprofessional, grew into a vision for authentic learning opportunities. Farrah identified the potential of supporting peer interactions and promoting authentic relationships. The primary reason the girl initially came to the segregated special education classroom was the money and treats she gleaned from her grandmother, but Farrah recalled that over time she saw genuine relationship-building taking place between her students and the paraprofessional's granddaughter. Farrah worked to convince administrators that a mentoring program would benefit all students. Once the plan was approved, she had to overcome other obstacles related to scheduling and grading, but she persevered and today the program is a success.

Farrah holds all students to high expectations, and the peer mentoring program was no exception. She designed an application and interview process to ensure that students who applied were a "good fit" for the program and understood the rigor involved. Farrah made no apologies for the fact that not all students are accepted as

mentors. During the interview process, Farrah looks for mentors who have the right motives. She addresses the students' intentions right away. Farrah reviewed basic questions that she asks the applicants at the start of the interview process: "Why do you want to be in here? What are your experiences with working with leadership? What are your experiences in working with people who have special academic needs or behavioral needs?" At times, she asks if the individual has considered a career in special education. Farrah listens to the responses and discerns the applicant's motive and disposition. Farrah said that disposition is key.

When I asked Farrah to define what she meant by "disposition," she acknowledged it is difficult to describe or define. The words she thinks best capture the notion of disposition are "heart" and "passion." She described the students who have the right disposition as "very real" and "authentic." Farrah values individuals who genuinely want to work in the special education setting. She believes the relationships and experiences provided by her program have yielded benefits for all students.

The implementation of her collaborative mentoring program has not only increased the inclusion of her students across campus, but also increased the respectful and inclusive interactions between Farrah and other educational professionals:

I went through the first couple of years... just feeling, like, you don't have anyone to eat lunch with. You don't have anyone to ...share anything with, because nobody understood what we did. When I got the program going, that is when it all changed, because now the mentors were going in and talking about what they were doing and how cool kids were in our program.

A program started to foster genuine friendships and eradicate stigma between peers has increased appreciation for Farrah's educational contributions within her school

community. Collaboration between students on her roster and their non-identified peers has promoted better understanding of special education services.

Although Farrah acknowledges there is still “Stigma” associated with disability in her school setting, she sees the mentoring program as breaking down some of the barriers and promoting leadership opportunities. With the same objective as the peer mentoring program, Farrah implemented a “unified” club for all students in her high school. The club differs from the program, because its emphasis is extracurricular. I did not observe the club, but while visiting Farrah I was struck by the fluid movement of students into and out of the classroom. There were 8 non-identified students who were working with the students, and every period students came and went from her classroom. Students worked around the room on a variety of projects and assignments. I saw typical high school banter and overheard plans being made by students for outside activities. Farrah explained to me that I was seeing the fulfillment of her objective: “My goal is to build genuine relationships.”

Farrah’s plan involves empowering her students by explicitly teaching social skills. She teaches “initiation in conversations” to help her students overcome social barriers. She utilizes YouTube videos and images to help students visualize and become comfortable with the unknown social settings. Farrah’s students benefit from practicing how to invite a peer to an activity or how to strike up a conversation in the lunch room. Students are authentically engaged with one another and can develop and refine social skills naturally within the peer collaboration program:

I think that is the one thing that happens naturally here. There is nothing fabricated about the whole Mentoring process. They come in, kind of as a reverse

inclusion, but they become friends. So, when they are at sporting events, when they are out in the community, when they are talking about wanting to go to prom, or homecoming, they are naturally a part of the conversation. They are not outside of it, and they are learning how to initiate by the role modeling of the students who have learned it naturally.

Farrah esteems the authentic inclusion that is promoted through her peer programs and explicit social skills instruction.

When Farrah selects the social skills that will be explicitly reviewed, she not only consults the IEP goals, but she asks her students for their input: “They spent the first day of class just brainstorming and putting down their list of things that they wanted to make sure that we cover. Then, we take that list and start to prioritize.” She and her co-teacher base the curriculum on the desires of the students and the identified students’ individualized education goals. This student-centered approach was observed during one of my observations at the start of the third trimester. Farrah introduced herself and the co-teacher to the group: “We are the teachers, but I like to say facilitators, because you are all who—and what—makes the group work...not us.” The “facilitators” then turned the activity over to the students who were actively engaged.

Special Olympics is another venue that Farrah uses to promote unified peer relationships and extracurricular experiences. Farrah expressed her appreciation of the “unified” direction the agency is working toward. She said there are misconceptions about who the athletes are. In order to help people move forward in their understanding, she is using the word “unified” across both the school and community settings. Farrah values the integration of all athletes into the competitions sponsored by Special Olympics.

Farrah actively takes her advocacy outside of the school walls to educate community members. When a community member expressed concern for an adult male who was walking in the streets independently, Farrah confronted the misguided thinking about disability. The concerned community member informed Farrah that she had stopped to offer the man a ride. Farrah laughed sarcastically and responded: “Okay, would you do that for any other 40-year-old man...walking in the street?” Farrah continued to expound on her reaction to the woman’s insistence that there was a difference between picking up just any 40-year-old man and a man with disabilities. When the woman insisted “that is not the same” thing. Farrah responded: “Well, yeah, it is! It is! Was he hurt? No. He made a choice to walk out in the cold. I do the same thing. I walk out in the cold.” Farrah seeks to educate her community members about the abilities and independence of individuals who are identified as disabled. She said she believes that part of being a member of society involves challenging socially constructed labels and providing new ways of thinking about things: “I think it is just by being a person, out in society, who continually takes the opportunities that are there to talk to people, or give them another viewpoint... that they have never ever had.”

Farrah’s role as an advocate also includes educating her colleagues. Recalling a particular occasion, she was shocked to receive a direct warning from a former colleague. The general education teacher who had never been to visit Farrah’s classroom, nor had she spoken to Farrah prior to the occasion, felt justified in her confrontation. She boldly informed Farrah that her students’ presence caused other students and staff discomfort. Farrah recalled the other teacher’s words: “I want you to just be careful ...when you put

your students out in front of the whole school, there are a lot of people who are not ready for that.” Initially the encounter left her speechless, but eventually she recovered and asked for clarification. The content teacher expounded: “It is not comfortable for them, and as much as you want them to be accepted here there are going to be people who are not ready for that.” Farrah did not back down from the admonition, but rather she clearly communicated her intention of advocating for her students: “I am going to advocate for these kids, no matter what it takes. If people are not ready for it, then they need to get ready.” Years later, Farrah still became emotional retelling this experience to me. She expressed absolute surprise that another educator would so boldly approach her with such a warning. Farrah inferred that, for her, the entire exchange was personal, as well as professional. She explained she was an advocate as a young girl for her brothers on the school bus: “This is what I am, this is what I was born to do.” Farrah honors her past when she advocates for individuals with disabilities.

#### Disposition Shaping Experiences

Farrah has been impacted by her siblings’ life experiences. Additionally, her interactions with other special education teachers who are not invested in their students’ progress, or the profession of special education, have also influenced who she is as a teacher. Farrah credits her life experiences with making her the teacher she is today.

When I asked Farrah what distinguished her from other special education teachers who she feels “lack the right disposition,” she immediately responded that “life experiences” have set her apart. She was quick to identify that her childhood experiences with disability have contributed to her “passion and heart.” Farrah’s family of origin has

been a primary influence in her disposition. Farrah described her siblings' identified disabilities and the impact that it had on her family of origin:

I have two siblings with significant disabilities.... one is four years older and one is four years younger. I have been around special education my entire life. I was born into a family that had special education needs, and I know no different.' It is also why I do what I do, and it is also why I have the passion to do it, because I was the ...sister who sat on a school bus and watched my older brother get teased.

Farrah credited her life experiences as impacting her understanding of social justice and equality.

When Farrah described her siblings, she did not identify them as disabled. She noted their medical diagnoses and their different needs, but on her family farm disability wasn't an option. She was raised with the understanding that her family was "normal." Within the context of Farrah's family, disability did not exist: "You never heard the word... In my mind, they weren't disabled...There was no disability. Disability was not an excuse." She stressed that this conceptualization of abilities has shaped her beliefs about special education and her students' potential. Farrah doesn't want excuses for students, but she does want equity and justice.

Farrah was greatly impacted by the injustice toward her brothers: "So, why did they get picked on? Why did they get asked to do things that were wrong? It is so innately...it is so deep...it is just like it is at the core of my soul." The challenges her brothers faced have resulted in a "passion" for equity in the classroom and society. Farrah said that what she referred to as her passion, or disposition, was also tied to her faith background: "Part of my disposition is from my faith and my faith up-bringing.... built on top of that empathy... I was trying to figure out fair versus unfair, and right versus



wrong, and all humans are humans.” Finally, she also credited her service-learning opportunities with agencies like Special Olympics as influential in shaping her professional disposition.

Interesting to Farrah was the realization that although she comes from a large family with other siblings who shared her experiences with disability, not all of them share her passion or disposition. Some of Farrah’s other siblings entered professions related to special education, but she alone has found this to be her “calling.” She feels there is a degree to which a person’s disposition is innate:

I truly believe I am the only one who had that...thing that made me like passionate about it. What is that? See, everybody is born with something that they are supposed to do in this world, and that is what it is. How do you teach somebody that? You don't. You give people experiences and maybe it is right for them...but I think a lot of it was just there.

Farrah credits some of her disposition to an innate quality that may be enhanced through exposure and opportunity.

As Farrah shared her “call to the profession of special education,” she expounded on her thoughts about a necessary disposition:

No matter what people say about putting a teacher into this level of special education, really every level, but especially this level, you have to have a heart for it, and you have to have a passion, or you are not going to like it. I love this! This is what I wanted to do.

Farrah’s enthusiasm was evident in her speech, as she again recalled her kindergarten self and the mistreatment that her siblings experienced. The experience impacted her.

Interactions with colleagues in the profession who do not share her passion have also taken a toll on Farrah’s professional disposition. She said she challenges a flawed system and is often overwhelmed by her desire to provide quality education for all

students. For the good of the students, she does the work that others are expected to do: “I am taking on every special education kid that every [other] teacher doesn't want to deal with. They are giving them to me, because they know I care, and I do care.” Farrah is frustrated with her colleagues who resist accountability and miss opportunities to improve their own practices through professional development. Additionally, she is frustrated by her administration for cutting supervisory supports within the district for special education teachers. The frustrations were fresh in Farrah’s mind, as she explained that just the previous evening there had been an opportunity for continued learning for the special education teachers in her district. However, the event was poorly attended. She said that out of the all of the special educators invited to participate only three attended the event, and she was one of the three. Farrah is infuriated by the lack of passion and investment in her profession. Farrah thinks that, minimally, the same expectations she has for students in her program should apply to teachers in the profession.

It is evident to Farrah, almost immediately, who is in the profession for the right reasons verses those who are not. Farrah is unsatisfied with the system that fails to put student needs first. She lamented that her administration hires individuals with conditional licensures for ulterior motives—like coaching. She wants to see educators hired who are committed to challenging students with high expectations and meeting their needs in more purposeful and inclusive ways.

Additionally, Farrah criticized the conscription of teachers, to positions they do not want, as a practice that negatively impacts students and the profession as a whole. Farrah said special education teachers and paraprofessionals must have dispositions that

promote student success, and that includes a desire to be in their assigned role: “I want somebody who wants to be here, who has the heart and the passion for it.” She said she doesn’t want just any paraprofessional pulled from the cafeteria and assigned to her room without consideration of their interests or disposition.

Farrah is irritated with administrators who do not understand special education: “We are hiring people that don't really...they don't get it. I think they don't understand what their role as a special education teacher is.” Farrah has pointedly asked her administrators about their hiring practices. She has suggested other recruiting techniques, but to no avail. She credited the school’s sports program with taking precedence over special education and student needs. Farrah laughed sarcastically as she explained the current status of the special education teachers at her high school. The most recent hire was another wrestling coach. Special education is a male dominated profession in her building, and Farrah has a clear understanding of what the bottom line really is: “This is my impression. [I] think that at the high school they need a lot of coaches. Okay? So, they are hired on conditionals.” Farrah described the current practices within her district:

They look at it as though not only do they get a coach, but also they get someone who is willing ‘to do’ special education, because who would want to do special education? You know? I am being sarcastic. That is how the administration...well, that is how I view the administration views it. They just have to take what they can get. It is just so frustrating and so maddening!

Farrah is frustrated by the lack of investment she regularly observes in the hiring practices of her administrators. She hopes that in the future administrators will recognize the need for special education teachers who are better prepared to meet their students’ needs.

General education content teachers have also impacted Farrah. During an interview, she described the extremes she has encountered. Specifically, Farrah has observed broad variance regarding student expectations:

The one thing that I think schools don't do a very good job with is just educating the regular education teachers about the expectations of the special education students. Sometimes regular education teachers are extremists. 'They are in my room and they are going to do just like everybody else, and I am not going to adapt, modify, and change things for them.'

Farrah said that the other extreme is no better: "On the other end... [When teachers say] 'Well, he has special needs. So, I will just give him a different assignment.' Farrah sighed in exasperation. Her hope rests with teacher preparation programs; she believes better preparation is beneficial for everyone involved in meeting the needs of students who may be identified as eligible for special education. Farrah hopes that educational practices improve to the benefit all students. The extremes she has witnessed should be replaced by equitable access.

In summary, Farrah credits her passion for special education to her family of origin. She reported that high expectations and authentic relationships with peers are critical to the post-secondary success of her students. She shared that advocating for her students' independence extends beyond her classroom.

### Conclusion

This chapter included the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) of three special education teachers—Mahalia, Leah, and Farrah. The unique portraits that emerged from the observations and interviews demonstrate the influence of education and life experiences on a teacher's beliefs. The beliefs about student potential impact the

disposition of the educator, which in turn directly influences the actions observed in their classrooms. For Mahalia her desire to protect and nurture students is paramount, and she is primarily concerned with the socioeconomic status of her students. Leah relies on a medical diagnosis and perceives deficits as the starting point for instruction; her segregated classroom and specially designed instruction are central to her identity as a special education teacher. Finally, Farrah's family includes siblings who have significant disabilities. She describes her passion to advocate, empower, and educate, not only her students, but also her colleagues and community as central to her role as a special education teacher. In the following chapter, the analysis of this data is discussed.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The underpinnings of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholarship, which aligns with the disposition of social justice described by Villegas (2007), supported the interpretation of the data. Interview, observation, and teaching statement data were used to examine the dispositions and beliefs of the three participants. The goal of this study was to learn what participants believed about their students' learning potential, and how those beliefs informed their practice. Finally, the study investigated if participating teachers attributed educational or life experiences to the formation of their professional dispositions?

The findings of this study support some key concepts. (1) Disposition is a construct that is not universally—or easily—defined. (2) Life and educational experiences have impacted the special education teachers' dispositions. (3) A noted silence related to alternative ways of conceptualizing disability, seems to speak to a reliance on the medical model in the special education classroom. (4) Special education teachers expressed frustrations with the current system and a feeling of devaluation from their content-teaching colleagues. (5) When given a chance to think about their practice, the educators demonstrated reflection and asked rhetorical questions of both the system and themselves.

The five generalizations are best discussed as: dispositions, the power of experiences, stigma, system-related frustrations, and the value of reflection. Unique and

meaningful responses from each of the participants are woven through the discussion topics. Consideration was given to the order of the topics included in this chapter. The discussion centered on dispositions best addresses the primary research questions of this study, and so the discussion begins with this topic. In order to understand how the participants' beliefs about their students' abilities, as well as the practices that reflect those beliefs were established or strengthened, the discussion around the power of experience appears second.

During the data collection process, the concepts of stigma and frustrations with the current system of special education were addressed, to varying degrees, by each of the participants; they follow in this chapter. Finally, I observed that each of the participants asked questions of themselves, or noted concepts they were unsure of, during the interview process. The value of being asked to reflect on professional practice completes this discussion.

### Dispositions

An educator's beliefs about their students' abilities and their professional responsibilities impact their instructional practices. The inclination of the teacher to plan instruction and respond to students, based on their beliefs, captures the understanding of disposition. Observations demonstrated that there were patterns of behavior that aligned with their expressed beliefs. In other cases, contradictions were noted between their words and actions. Inconsistency between words and actions is not new to the study of dispositions (Combs et al., 1969). Often the teacher was able to express what ideally should be done in the classroom, while they tended to behave differently. Interview

questions were designed to explicitly address what the teachers believed about their students' abilities, recognizing the influence that their beliefs have on their patterns of behavior—dispositions (Combs et al., 1969; Katz & Raths, 1985; Schussler & Knarr, 2013; Thornton, 2006; Villegas, 2007).

During interviews, each of the educators identified attributes they believe special education teachers need to possess. “Passion,” “humor,” “big-heartedness,” and “empathy” were some of the terms used by my participants. Welch et al. (2010) noted the problem with the variance in terms used to address the idea of dispositions, contending that the differences are more substantial than just word choice, as they are related to behaviors. Based on this, there is not clear meaning around the construct of disposition (Welch et al., 2010). This study confirmed the variance described by Welch et al. (2010). When my participants responded to questions centered on the cognate of disposition, each of the educators described different characteristics; identified characteristics represented diverse behaviors.

In order to capture the distinct dispositions of the three educators, a blend of both interview and observation data are necessary in this study. Mahalia described a need for caring, paternalistic, mission-driven relationships, and her actions seemed to align with these attributes. Likewise, Farrah described the need for passion, advocacy, and the promotion of independence. Nearly all of Farrah's observed classroom practices represent these characteristics. However, Leah's words and actions frequently did not coordinate. She stated she expected her students to achieve, but bemoaned the inclusion of academic standards. She said she always strives to believe her students can succeed,



but then described her surprise when they made academic gains or desired to participate in the general education classroom. In general, her practices did not align with the expressed words (written or recorded). Observation of the in-service teachers' practices were needed to interpret their interview data regarding their dispositions.

Unpacking the in-service teachers' dispositions required an understanding not only what each teacher believed about their students' abilities, but also how their beliefs informed their teaching practices. Of primary concern is the impact that the teachers' dispositions have on the students assigned to their classrooms. Consideration is given to the unique bent that Mahalia, Leah, and Farrah demonstrated and explicitly expressed. The discussion seeks to address how each teacher's unique disposition promotes or impedes student success, equitable access, and ultimately post-secondary opportunities.

#### Mahalia: Overly-Protective

When considering Mahalia's disposition, several concepts emerged. She described her approach to education as vocational, and she identified herself as a "servant leader." She repeatedly shared that her primary goal is connecting with students and building relationships, which she believes will promote academic achievement. Her expectations for student success are tied tightly to the students' homes. Mahalia's remedy is nurturing classroom. Her emphasis on caring relationships is similar to Schussler and Knarr's (2013). Without minimizing the power of relationship, the overwhelming sense of responsibility that Mahalia expressed for her students limits her learners' autonomy and potential independence.

She stated that she worries about her students who come from “at-risk” homes. However, Mahalia has constructed her own definition of “at-risk” based on her personal belief system. For example, students who do not live in traditional, two-parent homes are concerning to Mahalia; she agonized that many of her students come from “divorced homes.” Mahalia thinks teachers need to know about the impact of poverty and dysfunction on students. She strives to provide what she feels is missing from the homes of some of her students. Mahalia’s location of responsibility for the lack of student progress on dysfunctional family life was addressed by Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001) as a means to protect a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy. Her strong sense of vocation motivates her “mission work” in the classroom. Clearly, all teachers should create safe and nurturing classrooms, but we must examine the dispositional thinking behind the actions in order to address the impact of disposition, as well as personal interpretations of educational concepts, in this case, “at-risk.”

Mahalia has designed her classroom to ensure students feel safe and welcome: “I am like their security blanket.” Mahalia made this comment on two occasions. She explained, “I want my classroom to be very cozy and non-institutionalized.” Mahalia went on to say she wants her classroom to be very different than the “crappy homes” some of the students come from. Finally, she wants her classroom to be a place where students do not feel judged for not knowing the right answers: “If they don’t get it, like we will just work through it together.” Mahalia was observed providing support that looked like her expressed goal.

Attention to the emotional needs of students is supported by the scholarship of Schussler and Knarr (2013) as a necessary responsibility of the teacher. Mahalia expresses a desire to create a place for her students to take risks and build skills. Although Mahalia's environment is comfortable and inviting, one must consider the correct degree of challenge needed to promote independence, self-efficacy, and progress. Potentially, she is undermining her long-term goal for her students' independence.

A primary goal for Mahalia is that her students know they are "cared for deeply." Mahalia also believes that compassion is essential: "I think you have to have a super big heart." She expressed a need for special education teachers to help their students believe in themselves. Mahalia demonstrated interpersonal relationships with her students, and her students responded to her with similar affection and mutual respect. She openly shares her feelings and tells them she cares for them. She described the emotional supports as "empathy" and having a "big heart." Mahalia's philosophy of teaching centers largely on creating a place for students to feel "safe and confident in their abilities."

As demonstrated throughout her portrait, Mahalia places a great deal of power in the techniques and strategies that can control or minimize student difference. Her approach reminds the reader of the thesis of Kliewer and Drake (1998) that special educators would be considered less than professional if they did not rely on the medical model and prescribed remedies. Mahalia relies heavily on the strategies and techniques that she provides for her students to minimize or elevate challenges. She is steeped in the

study and application of interventions as both a strategist and a MTSS coach that rely on a medical model mindset.

Mahalia is hesitant to exit students from her special education roster for fear that they will not have the supports needed in high school. She supports students more than their IEPs require, and she bases this practice on her understanding that, “it is what they need.” Mahalia’s overly-protective disposition and sweeping desire to remedy all student challenges, within the walls of her classroom, potentially contribute to learned helplessness and a lack of self-efficacy for her students.

#### Leah: Deficit-Driven

Next, consideration is given to the impact of a disposition that designs instruction around disability. “Like, you have to work, if you want to make it back in,” said Leah to a student who wanted to be included in his general education class. Leah’s response not only discounted the student’s learning preference, but also negated the role of an IEP team decision regarding placement or location of services. Leah is true to only part of her personal teaching philosophy: “I will implement student-centered learning to focus on the needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles of my students.” Her emphasis is on the perceived needs of her students. Consideration of student ability, interest, and learning style are lagging behind. It seems her belief in the diagnosis reduces her expectation for the individual’s learning potential.

Leah’s imposed limitations, regarding her students’ abilities, seemed closely tied to her confidence in the medical model. Specifically, she considers herself to be an authority on Autism: “I just know in my mind what I need to do. I need to tell

people...like to stay back a little bit, don't get to close to her, give them a picture." These were the examples of educational advice that she provides as support for general education teachers. Leah was very comfortable in the authoritative and clinical role. She said she liked to "know" the student's diagnosis, and she was observed using labels as a foundation for instructional planning. Such behaviors are addressed by Biklen (2005) in his text. Leah used her role as a special education teacher to wield power and demonstrate her authority.

Leah repeatedly expressed confidence in teaching in the self-contained classroom with a modified curriculum, specifically those students she identified as Autistic. As I observed and listened to Leah, I questioned the degree to which her low achievement expectations for her students, her clinical mindset, and her need to "control" everything related to "her kids" was, in fact, creating the vicious cycle described by Ashton and Webb (1986). These authors highlight the relationship between a teacher's disposition and their sense of competence. Leah's lack of expectation for her students contribute to her reducing the rigor with which she plans and delivers instruction. Limited opportunity promotes poor performance, which in turn impacts the learning outcomes and her own self-efficacy.

The academic expectations set for her students by the Iowa Department of Education mean little to Leah. She repeatedly addressed the inappropriateness of such academic standards, and she described how difficult it was working with students who, according to her, can't retain academic skills. Leah described a particular student's math abilities: "I am not going crazy or anything...is she really doing this...is she really not

knowing how to add like  $8+1$ ?" In Leah's mind, the student's limited potential is fixed. Examples like this seemed to have solidified her overall beliefs about the learning potential of her students: "I know that it is not supposed to be 100% on their deficits or anything, but that really is a huge role in our decision making."

In fact, Leah expressed very little confidence in what her students would be capable of knowing. When retelling a story about a stolen wallet, she questioned that her students would even know what a wallet was. "Oh, that is a wallet?" asked Leah as she changed her voice to represent the person with a disability. She questioned the absurdity that such an individual would know enough to steal. My observations seem to support that Leah reduces her expectations for her students' based on their identified disabilities. This disposition is in direct contradiction to the expressed desire Leah has to ensure her students are included and respected.

Leah's comments about collaboration did not exhibit much value for the role of the paraprofessional. She described special education teachers who deliver specially designed instruction in the general education classroom: "I think they feel like a role of para.... it has got to be boring." Leah referenced her lack of interest in functioning like a "para" multiple times. Similarly, Leah told me about a paraprofessional who relayed too much information about what was happening in the general education classrooms. Leah addressed the associate candidly: "Like, look, I am not trying to be rude, but...I don't care about those classes. I am trying to get these guys to read and write and add." This quote underscores not only her desire to manage the support staff in a manner that lacks

collaboration and respect, but also her lack of appreciation for academic standards and limited expectation for her students.

Leah demonstrated very little expectation of potential for her students. Her surprise at student achievement and her overreliance on the medical model create few opportunities for her students to “exit” her preferred model of instruction. She demonstrated the power and autonomy (Timberlake, 2016) to employ her deficit-driven disposition when making instructional decisions.

#### Farrah: Passionate Advocate

Biklen and Cardinal (1997) addressed the potency of seeking input from those individuals who have previously had limited power. Likewise, Farrah is empowering her students by seeking their input and fostering their overall independence. Upon entering Farrah’s classroom for the first time, she was engaged in supporting a student-led initiative. The goal of the school-wide rally was to promote the secession the derogatory word, “Retard.” Farrah had appointed students as leaders and encouraged her students to share their own experiences and feelings about labels with one another. Farrah empowered her students by encouraging them to speak for themselves about their feelings regarding stigmatizing experiences.

Over the course of my visits with Farrah, she frequently referred to schools as “fabricated worlds” where inclusive activities are expected, but she stressed to me that the relationships fostered by her peer mentoring programs are genuine: “There is nothing fabricated about the whole mentoring process.” She explained that a “reverse inclusion” model with meaningful course assignments promoted genuine friendships: “So, when

they are at sporting events, when they are out in the community, when they are talking about wanting to go to prom, or homecoming, they are naturally part of the conversation. They are not outside of it.” Farrah often referenced her goal of providing her students access to the community outside of the school day. Her expectation, promotion, and advocacy for full access to society aligns with the scholarship of Connor et al. (2008). Farrah wants to see inclusive and unified opportunities for students outside of the “fabricated world” of school.

According to Farrah, her classroom is designed to promote high expectations and independence. More than once Farrah said, “I like to look at people’s abilities.” She stated that she sets “high” expectations for her students based on their abilities. She does not allow community members, fellow teachers, or misguided guidance counselors reduce expectations or employ pity for her students. Farrah believes that all students who participate in her courses, clubs, or activities benefit equally from the learning environment and equity that she promotes. The expectation that her students are equal and able contributors to their learning community underscores the work of Villegas (2007). Similarly, Thornton (2006) captured the importance of this disposition in the classroom teacher who, like Farrah, encouraged communication, allowed students to make choices, and had the expectation that students could contribute and succeed.

When Farrah and the co-teacher introduced themselves to their third trimester Peer Interaction Class, she summed up her approach to instruction: “We are the teachers, but I like to say facilitators, because you are all who—and what—makes the group work, not us.” Here, again, her actions and words indicate that she values the voice and opinion



of her students. She demonstrates respectful trust in her students' abilities to direct their learning. She reported that she seeks student input regarding the social skills curriculum; students make a list and prioritize the concepts they want to learn about. Not only do Farrah's practices demonstrate a student-centered mindset, but they empower the individuals being educated.

Farrah's classroom was full of students, both identified as eligible for special education services and their peers, but few adults were observed in her classroom. She believes too many support staff undermine student independence: "I already had three paraprofessionals. Which was overkill. I didn't want three paras." Farrah explained that students can learn "a lot of learned helplessness." She said the challenge is increased by the need for the associates to feel, and appear, busy, so she seeks to limit the number of support staff assigned to her room. This instructional decision further promotes student independence.

Farrah expects special educators, support staff, and student mentors to be authentic and passionate about their work. Overall, her actions were representative of her stated beliefs about "high expectations," independence, and genuine inclusion for her learners across all social settings. Farrah's observed actions appeared to be well-aligned with her stated disposition.

Overall, there was a consensus among the participants that certain attributes are needed for success in the profession of special education. However, only the "passion" that Farrah described aligned well with the social justice definition offered by Villegas (2007). Recalling the work of West and Pirtle (2014), families of students, who are

identified as disabled, want educators who have passion and see their children as dynamic—not just a diagnosis. Scholarship of DSE (Connor et al., 2008) also identifies the importance of presuming a person’s competence and ensuring equitable access to society. Building on the notion, that a disposition of social justice is beneficial for the promotion of independence and equity, both inside and outside of the classroom, the next point of conversation addresses experiences that may promote the development dispositions.

### The Power of Experience

Each of the participants articulated the impact that different life and educational events have had on their disposition. The beliefs they have formed determine how they interpret their students’ abilities, needs, and potential. Past experiences have powerfully contributed to these educators’ dispositions. A brief overview of each of the participant’s expressed, or inferred, disposition-shaping experiences is included to demonstrate the influence of life and educational experiences.

Mahalia credited a mission trip with shaping her vision and disposition. She specifically was impacted by the value a single mother placed on educational opportunities for her son and the words of a priest: “Life is about relationships.” Mahalia said it has been the epicenter of her practice since that time. The mission trip experience aligned with the compassion she said her parents had raised her to embody: “We were poor farmers, but my parents had such a great sense of compassion and just helping anybody that you were supposed to help.” Mahalia identified her sense of vocation as highly influential to her disposition. She described her understanding of her role as a

special education teacher: “My job as a special educator is mission work.” She expounded by saying she meets the poverty of mind, body, and spirit: “I am providing food for those that need it. I am providing a safe environment. I am providing a relationship that they may not have.”

Failing a college class, teaching in parochial schools, and working with unsupportive colleagues have also impacted Mahalia’s beliefs about her profession and teaching responsibilities. Finally, she cited her post-graduate coursework as responsible for shaping her disposition of “social justice.” Her life experiences, coupled with her educational opportunities, have contributed to Mahalia’s overall disposition.

Observations and interview data demonstrate that the beliefs Mahalia has formed about the neediness of her students does impact her instructional practices. She designs instruction that minimizes student differences and emphasizes personal relationship and student comfort. Educational research supports the importance of positive classroom relationships and the necessity of meeting basic needs, but the overly protective mentality does not promote independence. Her educational opportunities have enabled her to formulate skillful and reflective responses, and she puts great trust in the remedies offered by the current model of education to increase student achievement. The impact of her education and life experiences is evident.

Turning to the events that have shaped Leah, it is again clear that the classroom teacher designs instruction and engages with students based on their personal beliefs and experiences. Leah worked for many years as a paraprofessional and has an appreciation for the school’s hierarchy of power. During the observations, I was reminded more than

once of Charlton's (2010) discussion about oppression and power in Leah's room. Leah makes it clear to her students and support staff that she is in charge. She concluded that standing in the back of a general education classroom, listening to the content teacher, would reduce her to the role of para again. During each interview, she stressed that she wants to teach in her own self-contained special education classroom. I believe her lack of positive, or varied, educational experiences combined with the devaluation she experienced as a paraprofessional have contributed to her beliefs and disposition.

Leah identified that her teacher education program did not prepare her for the reality of the classroom. The lack of co-teaching experiences that included her skills or valued her contribution is a sentiment that was also shared by Mahalia. The lack of educational community and autonomy that Leah experienced was common to the other two participants. Negative professional experiences that foster beliefs and attitudes in the special education teacher, which in turn influence their dispositions—patterns of behavior in the classroom, require further investigation.

The power of experiences is also supported by Farrah's portrait. She explained that her siblings, who have significant needs, were not given special treatment or viewed as different: "In my mind, they weren't disabled... There was no disability." The description of her family life aligned with families interviewed by Biklen (1992); the author described families where siblings with disabilities were fully included. Disability was the "norm" in Farrah's family of origin; comfort with academic, behavioral, and physical differences was observed in Farrah's disposition. Her classroom behaviors reflect an attitude that deemphasizes disability. She does not shy from the

acknowledgement of impairment, but was observed designing instruction based on the students' abilities.

Farrah said her family and faith background prompted her to be service-oriented. She has worked with community and national organizations to promote inclusive practices and advocate for equitable housing and employment opportunities since early in her life. In the classroom, Farrah demonstrated a strong sense of social justice. During interviews, she placed a great deal of responsibility for the lack of equitable opportunities for her students on society's devaluation, and limited understanding, of disability. Additionally, Farrah has been warned by other professionals about the "discomfort" her students create. She has had general education teachers assign pity to her students. Negative exchanges with other educators, that lack equity, have contributed to her disposition for social justice and advocacy: "I am going to advocate for these kids, no matter what it takes...if people are not ready for it, then they need to get ready."

Clearly, one cannot replicate the life and education of any of the participants included here, and each educator is entitled to their own beliefs and values. The exception would be the devaluation of individuals based on attributes or abilities; dispositions of social justice are indisputably necessary for the classroom teacher (Villegas, 2007). Addressing the beliefs that teachers have about their students' potential gets at the heart of instruction that may either promote or deter academic achievement. Schussler and Knarr (2013) recognized the moral work involved in unpacking what one believes and how it impacts learning outcomes. Again, the lesson gained here indicates that

dispositions are shaped by life and educational experiences. More investigation is needed to explore specific educational opportunities that foster a disposition of social justice.

### Stigma

All three of the participants regretfully acknowledged that their students are devalued and stigmatized based on their identification as disabled or their eligibility for special education. Unanimously, they expressed some value for labels; labels are one of the means employed by a system to classify and dehumanize students, resulting in the assignment of stigma (Goffman, 1963). Identification of students for special education services reduces a student from a complex adolescent to a diagnosis, often resulting in stigma (Goffman, 1963). The guiding principles of DSE (Connor et al., 2008) promote a social model for disability, rather than the medical model represented by the assignment of labels. It is not surprising that the three in-service special education teachers, all groomed in the medical model, expressed a need for labels.

Fitch (2010) noted that there were three primary reasons offered for the application of labels: labels are needed for funding and services, labels are unavoidable, and labels are without stigma or value. Much like the participants in Fitch's (2010) study, each of my participants addressed a sense of necessity regarding the use of labels. None of my participants flatly denounced labels, nor did any of them associate the use of labels with stigma (Goffman, 1963). My participants represented a wide range of comfort with labels.

Mahalia is uncomfortable with labels; she doesn't want to "shatter somebody's little spirit by calling him or her disabled." She calls academic and behavioral differences

“struggles;” she believes this is less stigmatizing than the word “disability.” Although she challenged the use of prescribed labels during one interview, at a different time she stated that knowing a diagnosis can help her align strategies. She concluded that she is unsure of the best way to navigate the assignment of labels. Mahalia noted that for students who have behavioral needs teachers are generally the first to assign stigma: “Even if that student has changed, they always have a target on their back.” Dudley-Marling (2004) would support the idea that the construction of a stigmatized identity is created in the context of learning. During the data collection, Mahalia never questioned the impact of referring to a student’s “little spirit” or the potential reduction of a student’s self-determination in a classroom that functions as a “security blanket.” Her unchecked behaviors contribute to the perpetuation of stigma.

Leah was candid about her appreciation for the medical model approach to disability. Ultimately, she wants to work in a facility that enrolls students based solely on their diagnosis and identification for special education. She said labels are helpful:

I think it helps. I feel bad. I know everybody has the right not to say it, and everything, but it just helps. Like, otherwise, I have to use my imagination of what I think, and I would rather not do that.

Her hesitancy to employ imagination and her confident authority in centering instructional practices on her students’ deficits contributes to the stigmatization of her students.

Goffman (1963) addressed the contradictions that individuals who are stigmatized by society face all the time. Leah’s contradictions, in words and actions, perpetuate stigma. She communicated mixed messages: “Never think they can’t do... always think,

‘yes,’ they can do it.” At the same time, she “sneaks in” the functional skills she knows they need and discredits the academic standards. She designs instruction and support services based primarily on her lack of expectation: “I know that it is not supposed to be 100% on their deficits or anything, but that really is a huge role in our decision making.” Leah’s lack of buy-in to the academic standards for her students deny them access to information. Recalling that Villegas’ (2007) desired disposition promotes social justice and provides access to knowledge, Leah’s limited expectations impose stigma not only in their current educational setting, but also into their post-secondary lives.

The rationale that Farrah provided for the use of labels was tied to common language used at team planning meetings. As stated earlier, this aligns with Fitch’s (2010) reasons for labels in special education. She said labels were, “a place to start” conversations designed to align supports and services with student needs. She did challenge the stigma that is assigned with labels and the misunderstood use of language in the profession of special education: “There is no high or low functioning. Those are not words.” However, she concluded: “We have to identify and label for a purposes of giving kids the most appropriate and least restrictive environment education.” She concluded there should be limited discussions related to the diagnosis and attached label.

Farrah said that for the most part individuals who have easily identified differences are pitied, while students who have invisible disabilities are more stigmatized by society: “The kids that look like a typical-average teenager are the ones that get picked on and bullied more, because people are not expecting it from them.” She challenges people who feel sorry for her students: “My kids have no bad things going on in their



life.” Farrah’s purposefully works to deconstruct the stigma associated with special education and disability. She actively educates, integrates, and empowers, both inside and outside of the classroom. She never referred to either the medical or social model of disability, yet she reflected a social model orientation. As noted earlier, this is directly related to her life experiences.

One of the byproducts of the current model’s reliance on the medical model, to the exclusion of the social model, is the reduction of students to their assigned label or “deficit.” In order to promote equitable learning and post-secondary living and working options, all students must be presumed competent (Biklen, 2005) and given access to the general education curriculum. The stigma associated with special education and disability must be addressed in an interdisciplinary manner that acknowledges the role of society (Connor et al., 2008).

#### System-Related Frustrations

Frustrations with the current system of education were expressed by all three of the educators. Mahalia dislikes the limited access she has to all students in her role as a special education teacher; Farrah is irritated by the hiring practices of administrators who do not value the role of special education teachers; and Leah is frustrated by academic standards assigned to her students and her accountability for their progress. Mills (1956) suggests that individuals who are part of a system, like education, are so submerged in the routine of the established institution that they lack an ability to identify their own contribution to the system. The fact that the primary actors involved in the system of

education, teachers, struggle to identify solutions or feel empowered to elicit change proliferates the feelings of frustration.

Unanimously, the women spoke of professional disrespect experienced in their roles as special education teachers. Examples provided, during their interviews, highlight devaluing exchanges between the strategists and the general education/content teachers. Mahalia acknowledged a degree of disrespect based on her status as a strategist: “I think that sometimes people, who are in special education are seen as second-class teachers, because we don’t have a content expertise.” The lack of respect for the special education teacher creates a power struggle that undermines the expectation of collaboration. For Leah, most of her references to the disrespect stem from encounters with content teaching peers regarding the struggle over who has control and authority. She described the teachers in the content classes as “standoffish,” and she suggested that “they don’t want to give up control.” She talked about the “fights” she has had with general education teachers who did not implement the IEP appropriately. Finally, when Farrah described the disrespectful encounters she has had with other teachers, she also expressed that her license and endorsements equip her to educate all students well. Farrah concluded that she often feels frustrated and underappreciated by colleagues.

One can question the root of this devaluation within the profession. Is there a lack of genuine investment in students who are identified as disabled? Is stigma (Goffman, 1963) a burden shared by those who are in close relationship with the individuals—their teachers? Or, perhaps, the “dual system” (Fitch, 2010) establishes a dynamic that is constantly in tension at the faculty level? Maybe, educators who have been in the system

long enough are put off by the false authority created by the medical model and employed by some special education teachers? All of the participants demonstrated a degree of defensiveness and frustration regarding the lack of value they encounter, regardless of their endorsements, degrees, and experiences. The point worth consideration is that a system divided cannot serve any of its students well.

When provided with data that demonstrated lagging results for students who were receiving special education services, Mahalia questioned the study. Likewise, Leah was suspicious of data her administrator provided that evidenced the benefits of inclusion in the general education classroom. Their responses match the work of Fitch (2010). The traditional approach to special education reinforces the established system of sorting based on difference. Farrah blamed school administrators who do not understand special education, and demonstrate this with their hiring practices, as contributing to limited opportunities and the poor academic progress that some students make.

Farrah cited the common practice of hiring coaches for her high school's sports' teams as evidence: "This is my impression. [I] think that at the high school they need a lot of coaches. Okay? So, they are hired on conditionals." The hiring practices contribute to poorly aligned dispositions, lowered expectations, limited academic opportunities, and ultimately reduced post-secondary outcomes. Her sentiments align with Biklen (1992). Farrah attributed this attitude to the devaluing she believes is associated with her profession: "They get a coach, but also they get someone who is willing 'to do' special education, because who would want to do special education? You know? I am being

sarcastic.” Farrah became very passionate as she described the lack of administrative support and their unwillingness to invest in quality special educators.

All of the participants noted frustrations with the current model of education. As noted earlier, Mahalia relies on the established system of education to correct itself. Her leadership role, which she supposes empowers her to make changes, may in fact be solidifying her position of compliance and acceptance (Mills, 1956). Leah expressed concerns and frustrations with the current model of special education, but she offered no suggestions for change. Farrah, however, proposed a solution for system redesign: “Let Montessori be the norm. All the way through high school...even college.” Here, again, we see the influence of their unique dispositions impacting their interpretation of the system’s failures and their contribution to either perpetuating the current model or eliciting change.

A system related challenge that was minimally addressed by the participants, but captured during the observations, was the in-service teachers’ limited understanding of the options for the delivery of specially designed instruction and academic expectations. Further research would be needed to clarify the observed discrepancies between the State’s mandates and teachers’ practices. Suggestions for potential research and implications of this observation are addressed in the ensuing Chapter.

#### Value of Reflection

The final topic of discussion derived from this research study was the observed power of asking questions that promoted self-reflection. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) challenges researchers interested in promoting educational change to engage in

thoughtful work at the teacher level. Schussler and Knarr (2013) underscore the importance of providing educators time to reflect and identify their biases, as well as recognize the impact of their interpretations on their classroom decisions. Richert (2002) found that when teachers were involved in retelling their stories in collaborative settings the reflection promoted personal and professional growth. As Mahalia, Leah, and Farrah discussed their experiences, both in and out of the classroom, as well as their thoughts about their students' potential, they often responded to my inquiry with self-reflective and clarifying questions. I observed the benefit of providing a space, in this case the interviews, for the teachers to describe: their personal beliefs, their thoughts about dispositions, their instructional practices, and their experiences related to disability.

Mahalia took notes during the interviews. She sat in silence, as she pondered her responses. Farrah was anxious to share her knowledge, but she also demonstrated curiosity about alternative ways of considering disability based on the interview questions. Although Leah seemed most confident in her thinking and current practices, she also formulated questions during the interviews. Captured below are some of the questions or observations that arose as a result of the interview experience.

The following questions were asked by Mahalia at different times during the three interview and observation periods:

Other people call them my kids, so then is it a placement? How do you take away time from the general education when they still need help on those assignments? Am I just giving the student answers? Are they [students] able to generalize this, or are they just performing for me in my room? Am I being naïve? Do we need to talk about it [disability]?

Mahalia's questions were often directed at her own role in the classroom; it is admirable that she examines the learning context and her contributions before locating deficit in her students. However, in her desire to protect and nurture her students, she may be fostering their dependence.

Many of Leah's questions capture her strong feelings about the academic expectations. Again, the following questions are taken from her multiple interviews:

How can she [student] make it [in math class]? What are we doing this for [academic instruction]? When do I fit them in [functional skills she sees as critical]? In special education everything is so focused on what can you do to help these students that struggle, you know?

The majority of Leah's questions center on her students' identified disabilities and her concern for the current academic curriculum.

Leah asked questions throughout the interview process, but many were for the purpose of retelling events to me. Some examples are included. When confronting her aunt who had maligned a person in the community who had a disability, Leah asked: "Why would you accuse him? But, she went on to discredit the individual's ability to recognize a wallet. When taught in her pre-service work that it is necessary to close the academic achievement gap, Leah asked: "Achievement isn't just academic, you know?" When her student could not recall math skills, Leah questioned: "Is she really not knowing how to add like  $8+1$ ?" Over the course of the data collection, I did not observe any significant shift in Leah's thinking, but she seemed to appreciate the opportunity to express her beliefs about her profession and her students' needs.

Finally, Farrah generated questions that challenged the current model of special education: "What would happen if the students would come out on their own free will?"

What if they would not be put into a class period...where they are forced?" She believes that every student would benefit from a redesign of the delivery models for instructional and support services. Her suggestions demonstrate her presumption of her students' competence (Biklen, 2005; Connor et al., 2008). Farrah's promotion of sweeping reform was birthed from her reflection and response to questions during the interviews. Yet, at the end of her optimistic suggestions, she paused and asked: "How do you organize that and manage it?" This statement demonstrated her understanding that the current practices in education are entrenched.

Farah expressed questions that cannot be answered, but have impacted her disposition of social justice: "So why did they [brothers] get picked on? Why did they get asked to do things that were wrong?" Based on this, she is concerned about the beliefs, experiences, and dispositions of individuals who work in her classroom. She seeks to identify individuals who do not see disability; she wants peer partners and paraprofessionals who see abilities and teenagers. Before Farrah accepts peer mentors in her program or employs support staff, she asks critical questions that identify dispositions and also promote reflection:

Why do you want to be in here? What is your experiences with working with leadership? What are your experiences working with people who have special academic needs or behavioral needs? Do you ever think about it [special education] as a career choice?

Farah wants to ensure that the individuals who work in her classroom have the "passion" that expects student progress. Although Farrah did not consider that the "passion" she was seeking was a disposition of social justice, she has been interviewing candidates for

years, identifying dispositions that promote independence, inclusion, and access to learning (Connor, et al., 2008; Villegas, 2007).

Although Farrah values authentic relationships and full access to society, she posed numerous questions during the interview process that demonstrate her suspicion of the word “inclusion”: “Where do you see ‘inclusive’ other than in schools? Where do you hear that term [inclusive]? What happens [to inclusive practices] after high school? Are things the way that I would like them to be, idealistically?” She believes society has a great deal of work to do to ensure that her students have equal post-secondary living, leisure, and employment options. Her location of the responsibility on society, rather than the individual, demonstrates her conceptualization of disability is socially and not medically constructed. Having never been exposed to the concept of DSE or a social model of disability, her life experiences have shaped her beliefs and disposition.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrated that teachers have established beliefs, based on their life and educational experiences, which drive their instructional planning and student engagement. Each of the participants described the influences they credit with shaping their professional disposition. Likewise, all participants identified frustrations with the current model of special education and the stigma that their students, and at times they, experience. During the interview process, all of the teachers asked rhetorical and self-reflective questions. Although the degree to which this was observed varied, the value of reflecting on their beliefs, dispositions, and practices was evident. In order to promote equitable access to learning opportunities, teachers need: dispositions that have a social



justice orientation (Villegas, 2007), beliefs that presume student competence (Biklen, 2005), and an understanding of society's role and inclusivity (Connor et al., 2008) of individuals who are identified as disabled. The following chapter considers how to foster a disposition of social justice and other implications of this study.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

This chapter addresses the contribution of this study to the discussion and study of teacher dispositions. Based on the insights produced by this study, suggestions are included for continued education, in the form of professional developments, for in-service teachers. Similarly, recommendations are made for teacher education programs to promote a disposition, in their pre-service teachers, rooted in social justice that expects student progress and presumes student competence. Finally, this chapter concludes with some proposals for future research.

#### Contribution

A review of literature demonstrates the continued interest in the study of a teacher's disposition. My contribution to the research is unique; I employed an identified intersection between the principles of Disability Studies in Education (DSE), specifically the presumption of competence (Biklen, 2005), and the mandate for educators to expect progress, found in current teaching standards, as a framework. Recognizing that such a disposition of expectation impacts instructional opportunities and aligns with a disposition of social justice (Villegas, 2007), the concept of social justice provided another framework to aid in the interpretation of the data. Again, marrying educational standards, the presumption of competence, and an understanding of the potency of a disposition rooted in social justice created a distinctive research design.

My study highlights the importance of examining the role of a teacher's disposition, specifically a special education teacher's disposition. Using the above described frameworks to gain an understanding of the participants' dispositions, interview questions explicitly examined participants' beliefs about their students' learning potential and the biographical information they credited with shaping those beliefs. Multiple classroom observations enabled me to consider how their words matched their instructional practices. The findings, as discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrate that educational and life experiences do shape the teacher's beliefs about their students' abilities. These beliefs inform their dispositions, and dispositions directly influence their students' access to the general education curriculum and post-secondary opportunities. This study demonstrates the necessity of explicit inquiry and observation in the context of the classroom. The limited scope of my research prohibits sweeping generalizations, but the evidence produced by this study speaks to the social justice issue and potency of the teachers' dispositions.

Over the course of this study, it was observed that none of the educators had been exposed to a social construction of disability. The participants varied greatly in their educational experiences, but they had all been schooled in the medical model. They were trained to diagnose and treat their students. This study questions the exclusive reliance on the identification of deficit within the student. I question how the current system, steeped in a philosophy of "norms" and remediation, can promote equitable learning opportunities for all students—as mandated in current teaching standards. The dichotomy between the current model's preparation for endorsements in special education and the

ideology and language of teaching standards is observed and must be further examined and challenged. The social model of disability must be included in the preparation of both the classroom teacher and special education teacher. This study demonstrates the importance of introducing a broader and more complex understanding of the students who are identified as eligible for special education services.

In the special education classroom, stigmatizing behaviors take the form of overreliance on a medical diagnosis or the assignment of a label that predetermines a student's overall learning potential. The reduction of any student to their identified disability is in direct opposition with a disposition that "presumes competence" (Biklen, 2005) and the expectation of current teaching standards. Until the special education teacher sees their students as competent, they will fail to plan and teach with rigor and expectation of progress. As simplistic as this appears, my research confirms the notion that the beliefs and dispositions of educators impact the fidelity with which they fulfill their contract—to teach their students.

Here, again, the conversation returns to the sway that a teacher's beliefs have on their disposition, and in turn their instructional decisions. The beliefs held by the teacher about their students' abilities reflect their beliefs about deficits and needs; this was evidenced by the varying interpretations of the participants regarding the essential disposition of a special education teacher. For example, within this study it was observed that Mahalia perceived her students' non-traditional homes to be "at-risk" and defined her role by relationships that she felt nurtured and cared for those she identified as lacking. Leah credited the labels and limitations assigned by the medical community as absolutes

and applied them to her students with a broad brush: focusing on the deficits she identifies. For Leah, the special education teacher's disposition rests in authority demonstrated by pushing for life skill training and segregated programs. Finally, Farrah also demonstrated that her beliefs contributed to her interpretation of a critical disposition for the special education teacher. Farrah's beliefs about her students' need for independence and opportunities in their post-secondary lives have contributed to her understanding that the disposition of a special education teacher is that of a passionate advocate. The relationship between beliefs and disposition is not unique within scholarship, but this study ties the expectations a teacher has for their students' potential to practices that either promote access and opportunity—or isolate students from the general education context and foster dependence.

Lastly, and unexpectedly, my study demonstrated that inquiry into the teacher's belief system prompted self-reflection. I was excited to hear each of the participants, to varying degrees, ask questions and think out loud about their beliefs. Asking the questions and listening to the responses, demonstrated to me the importance of research at the teacher level. I observed participants pondering the life and learning events that they attributed to their beliefs. Without opportunities to reflect on their instructional practices and beliefs about student potential, the participants of the study may not have considered the relationship between their cognition and their overt behaviors. Based on my research, I believe asking educators to tell their stories can invite them to reflect and grow.

In sum, this study not only builds on the literature from Chapter 2, but also offers some unique contributions. Again, the scope of this study is limited and generalizations are not applicable. However, the meaning and interpretations offered by the participants emphasize the influence of personal beliefs in the classroom. Additionally, the life and educational experiences that have influenced belief systems were identified. Again, exploration of the unseen attributes of the educator can be achieved through interview and observation: demonstrating that beliefs influence the behaviors in the classroom—dispositions. Finally, this study produced unexpected findings. None of the educators had been exposed to the social model of disability, all of the teachers spoke of professional disrespect and frustrations with the current model of special education, and the investigation prompted participants to generate questions and engage in self-reflection.

### Implications

It is encouraging to consider the implications of this study. If education and experience have previously influenced the teacher's disposition, continued learning and diverse teaching experiences may further promote a disposition that presumes student competence and fulfills the mandate of the standards while achieving a greater degree of social justice within the classroom. Acknowledging it is necessary to foster a disposition that presumes competence (Biklen, 2005), in both in-service and pre-service special education teachers, to ensure equitable education opportunities for all students (Villegas, 2007) is the primary implication of this study. Educational opportunities must afford teachers the chance to contemplate the power of their beliefs and dispositions. Working toward this goal, several implications from this study are noted.

The all-encompassing objective of teacher education programs should be the preparation of teacher candidates who can teach all students (Villegas, 2007). Teachers need to embody dispositions that promote student achievement (Jorgensen, 2005). Attention at the pre-service level is critical, but if educational reform is directed solely to new teachers, transformation will stagnate and achievement gaps will remain. No less attention should be given to the educational needs of in-service special education teachers. It would be beneficial for in-service teachers to receive professional development that would expose them to alternative ways of thinking about their students' learning potential and disability (Jorgensen et al., 2007). Implications from this study support educational and experiential opportunities for both the in-service teacher and the pre-service teacher that foster a disposition that presumes competence—expects learner potential.

#### In-Service Implications

As none of the participants in my study identified any familiarity with, or exposure to DSE, continued education would be beneficial. Jorgensen et al. (2007) provided professional development for in-service special education teachers that allotted time, encouragement, and a professional learning community in which to explore their beliefs about their students' proficiency. Professional development opportunities, like those developed by Jorgensen et al. (2007), would provide in-service teachers, steeped in the medical model, not only a place to reflect on a social construction of disability, but also a sense of connectivity between special education teachers in the field. Professional development opportunities would enable the in-service teacher to consider the impact of

reducing a student to their assigned label or disability. Explicit assignments that promote self-assessment and reflection would enable teachers to identify the influence of their beliefs on their classroom decisions (Baglieri, 2008; Richert, 2002; Schussler et al., 2010). Professional development opportunities would encourage special education teachers to see the impact of their belief systems on the social justice afforded their students.

Professional learning communities would reduce the sense of isolation and autonomy experienced by my participants. Comments shared by my participants suggest that they felt isolated from the content teachers and other faculty members; this was also identified in the literature (Timberlake, 2016). Participants of this study suggested they not only experienced isolation from other special education colleagues, but they also noted challenges related to collaboration with general education colleagues. One of the implications of this isolation is the autonomy of the participants. Professional development must address the potency of their individual preferences, relationships, and interpretation of the continuum of services.

One way of addressing the sense of autonomy that the in-service special education teachers reported experiencing is to redefine or clarify their expectations. By implementing Timberlake's (2016) suggested collaboration with explicit co-teaching models and well-defined responsibilities the hope would be collaboration that is respectful of both the content teacher's and the special education teacher's roles. System-wide educational alignment of endorsements that enable strategists to co-teach in the environments they are licensed to teach content in would promote inclusivity. Such



professional development must not segregate out the special education teacher, but be provided across school settings. Professional development and continued learning opportunities would dismantle the need for teachers to posture themselves in positions of power and would result in shared responsibility and collaboration.

Professional development opportunities should be established to provide in-service teachers the opportunity to identify the beliefs and dispositions that influence their classroom practices (Baglieri, 2008; Jorgensen et al., 2007). By promoting an alternative to the sole reliance on the medical model, teachers may view their students as complex and capable. The presumption of student competence is a belief that undergirds the instructional decisions, and Timberlake (2014) demonstrated the potency of a special education teacher's interpretation of "access" in the general education classroom and with the general education curriculum.

Consideration must be given to the power of "academic activism" (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Across the disciplines of the K-12 school, educators need to design and implement curriculum that promotes the social model of disability. Increasing the access of individuals who are identified as eligible for special education to the general education classroom and curriculum is paramount, but without continued educational efforts to ensure the belief and value of all individuals as competent and capable participants the efforts will not succeed in ultimately affording social justice for all. Dispositions reflect the beliefs held by the individual. Using film (Connor & Bejoian, 2006), informed literature (Villegas, 2007), and considering the perspective of individuals who are identified as disabled (Connor et al., 2008) elementary students may begin to understand

the social context of disability. Recognizing the power of education, the inclusion of the social model of disability in the K-12 classroom, is needed to address the pervasive approach and view of disability. Social Justice affords access to all. Schools must not promote inclusive practices that are described as “fabricated worlds,” but rather offer education and exposure to disability studies.

### Pre-Service Implications

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation supports the examination and development of dispositions in future teachers. Pre-service preparation programs provide a rich environment to stimulate reflection on personal beliefs and values that influence dispositions. Villegas. (2007) suggests introducing opportunities that develop desired dispositions early in the education experience. LePage et al. (2008) asserts that teacher educators need to help pre-service teachers acknowledge and challenge their predisposed assumptions. Using written statements as a baseline, teacher education programs can develop course work and diverse field experiences that challenge the dispositions that do not align with a belief in the educability of all students—or a presumption of competence. I propose the use of scholarship from DSE and personal narratives regarding the prior experiences that pre-service teachers have had regarding difference and disability will promote the examination of their beliefs about disability. Baglieri (2008) employed this approach with graduate level pre-service teachers and found it expanded the way they conceptualized and interfaced with “disability.”

Trzcinka and Grskovic (2011) assert that much insight can be gained by examination of teacher candidates’ reflections. Following their lead, education students

would be expected to formulate questions that promote reflective practice after diverse field experiences. Such practices would encourage pre-service teachers to self-regulate their biases and reshape their beliefs. In a similar manner, Villegas (2007) suggests the first step toward developing a disposition that is action based and social justice driven is to ask pre-service teachers to identify what they believe about their students' achievement, and then provide educational opportunities that promote change. By asking pre-service teachers to define their beliefs, teacher education programs can address the tendencies of behavior, dispositions, which expect student competence or negate it.

Inviting pre-service teachers to read the scholarship of Disability Studies in Education could deliver another layer of reflection and also work toward the goal of extinguishing a myopic medical model approach to special education; the principles of DSE (Connor, et al., 2008) are designed to promote social justice. As noted earlier, the conceptualization of the medical model, which locates deficit within the learner, is in direct opposition to the language and expectations of the teaching standards. Given the relationship between beliefs and patterns of classroom behavior, it is imperative that the concept of disability be reconsidered. Students should be seen as the complex and capable individuals they are to ensure an equitable education for all students.

Additionally, there is a need to provide varied field experiences that engage pre-service teachers with students who are identified as eligible for special education services. Villegas (2007) addressed the benefits of experience and scholarship. Such field placements should be coupled with structured self-reflection and discussion about the

varied experiences. These field experiences would afford scaffolding and sponsor critical reflection that could yield belief changing and disposition reshaping occasions.

### Future Research

Segregated classrooms remind us of a social problem that is difficult to address, especially in the limited scope of this study, the degree to which society continues to isolate, separate, and remove difference? We need look no further than the portraits included here, or the headlines of our national news, to see that there is much work to do in the area of social justice and equitable opportunities. As educators we want to lead the charge of change. Working toward this goal, we must address the thoughts and dispositions that are at the center of the special education classroom.

Future research must investigate the role of a pre-service teacher's disposition toward disability. Teacher education programs invest a great deal of time and resources into preparing students for the diversity in their future classrooms, and more investigations should center on the "stigma" (Goffman, 1963) assigned to individuals with different academic and behavioral needs. More investigation should be done to determine how teacher education programs assess teacher candidates' beliefs about student potential. Research should consider the relationship between the assignments and activities that promote the social context of disability and the development of a disposition that expects student potential. The greatest frequency of diversity that teachers will interface with is that of ability; teacher education programs would be remiss not to address dispositions related to this construct.

Research should also be continued in the area of closing the achievement gap between students who receive special education services and those who do not. As reviewed in Chapter 1, the measures found on *Iowa School Report Cards* or through data collected by the Iowa Department of Education, continue to show only minor and limited progress for students who have an individualized education program (IEP) compared to their non-identified peers' proficiency rates. Closer scrutiny must be given to the practices that are promoting academic growth. Implications from this study support the findings noted by Timberlake (2016). Educational and collaborative supports must be given to the special education teacher to ensure they are effective in their implementation and integration of academic goals that align with Core Standards, alternative assessment, individualized education goals, and the delivery of specialized instruction.

Likewise, research should be done to examine the post-secondary outcomes of students who received their specially designed instruction within the context of their general education classrooms compared to those who were educated in pull-out or segregated settings. This data should include a longitudinal study of individuals' post-secondary living, learning, and working outcomes compared to expressed goals from their high school exit IEP. Comparison of post-secondary goals with the actuality of individuals' lives after graduation would enable the system of education, the current model of special education, to examine the degree to which students are enjoying full access to society.

The individuals who have been, or are, recipients of special education should be interviewed about the value and impact they assign to teacher dispositions. An effort

should be made with future research to identify the instructional models and educator dispositions that promote post-secondary success, as defined by the recipients of the services/education. Rather than assuming that students are passive recipients of specialized treatments, educational research should examine the stories of students and graduates to identify potential system-wide barriers and beneficial services.

Data should be collected from the special education teachers to identify resources and supports needed to support their continued learning. More research should be done regarding the implementation of a co-teaching model; investigations must unpack the conflicts and disrespect addressed by each of my participants.

Research should address the shortage of special education teachers. The limited employment pool promotes undesirable hiring practices. Data should be collected to examine those educators who tack on a strategist endorsement to secure a “foot in the door.” More data is needed from school board members, superintendents, and building principals to determine the degree of understanding and expectation that individuals with hiring power have about function of special education services.

### Conclusion

In sum, this qualitative research study examined the beliefs of three in-service special education teachers. The examination of both interview and observation data addressed the research questions regarding: the special education teacher’s beliefs about their students’ learning potential; the influence their beliefs have on their patterns of classroom behaviors, or instructional practices—dispositions; and the experiences they attributed to shaping their beliefs and dispositions. This final chapter of the study has

addressed the contributions this study made to the examination of disposition, highlighted implications gleaned from the data, and suggested future research agendas. Ultimately, this study demonstrated that, within its limited scope, beliefs that presume students are competent and expect them to demonstrate learning potential are at the foundation of instructional decisions that promote social justice.

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## APPENDIX A

## DISPOSITION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

- Setting high performance goals for all students and holding them accountable;
- Planning and implementing an enriched curriculum that challenges every learner to develop critical thinking skills;
- Helping students examine text from multiple perspectives;
- Ensuring that learning activities offer appropriate adaptations for English language learners and for students with special needs;
- Helping students see connections between what they are asked to learn in school and their everyday lives outside school;
- Selecting and using materials that are relevant to students' individual and cultural experiences;
- Using examples and analogies from students' lives to clarify new concepts;
- Using varied instructional strategies to accommodate differences in approaches to learning;
- Ensuring that all students are actively engaged in learning activities;
- Providing encouragement for all learners to excel; and
- Creating an inclusive classroom culture (Villegas, 2007, p. 375)

## APPENDIX B

## INFORMED CONSENT

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW**

**Project Title:** An Exploration of Teacher Dispositions: Expectation of Potential

**Name of Investigator(s):** Kathleen L. Saleh

**Invitation to Participate:** You are invited to participate in a research project designed to meet my dissertation requirement at the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

**Nature and Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine the dispositions and beliefs of three in-service special education teachers.

**Explanation of Procedures:** You are invited to participate in three 45-60 minute interviews carried out over the course of four to six weeks. The purpose of the interviews is to learn more about what you believe about student potential (behavioral, academic, and social) and the dispositions you express as beneficial for special education teachers. The interviews will be arranged at a time and place that is convenient for you. With your permission the interviews will be audio-recorded. I may use direct quotes from the interviews. If I do use direct quotes, they will be credited to the pseudonym assigned to the participant. This data will be transcribed and kept for one year after the completion of the study. The transcribed interviews will be kept confidential and in a secure location.

Additionally, a minimum of one visit to your classroom and observation of your teaching is requested. This will not involve any photography or video recording, but rather field notes will be collected. The field notes will document classroom activities and instructional approaches. In order to protect your identity and the school/district for which you teach, pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and numbers will be assigned to the schools. Descriptions of schools will be generic in nature and in no way indicate location within the state of Iowa.

Finally, I would like to collect relevant teaching artifacts, such as classroom schedules and lesson plans to better understand the daily operation of your classroom and establish some context for the interviews. Goals, individual learning objectives, or progress-monitoring data (with no identifying student information) that you are willing to provide will help me better understand your instructional practices and decision-making.

The data collected during this research study may be used to inform future research studies.

**Discomfort and Risks:** Risks to participation are minimal. Risks to participation in this study are similar to those experienced in day-to-day life. There are no foreseeable risks to participation.

**Benefits and Compensation:** You may benefit from this study by having the opportunity to share your experiences. No compensation is offered for your participation.

**Confidentiality:** All information obtained during this study that could identify you or the district you work for will be kept confidential. The summarized findings with no identifying information will be published in my dissertation and may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the study or desire additional information, now or in the future regarding your participation or the study in general, you may contact Kathleen Saleh at 563-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the office of the IRB Administrator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

**Agreement:** Include the following statement:

**I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of investigator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of instructor/advisor)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



## APPENDIX C

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH STUDY

Email Invitation

Dear Educator,

My name is Kathleen Saleh, and I am a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa. In partial fulfillment of my degree, Doctor of Education, I have designed a research study. I am interested in studying the dispositions and beliefs of special education teachers, and I would like to learn more about the instructional decisions and practices of educators employed as a Strategist II (Behavior Disorder/Learning Disability, Intellectual Disabilities, and Physical Disabilities). I am aware you work in this area and you were suggested as a potential participant. I am writing to invite you to participate in this research project. I would be happy to visit with you and share details of this project if you are interested in participating. If you are willing to consider participation, please respond to this email with a preferred date and time of day. I will contact you via telephone to answer additional questions you may have. I appreciate your consideration.

Many Thanks,  
Kathleen Saleh

Follow-up Phone Call

Thank you for your interest and willingness to visit over the phone with me about the research project that I am inviting you to participate in over the next two months. First, let me share again the purpose or intent of my research study. I am interested in studying the role of dispositions and beliefs in special education teachers, specifically those employed as Strategist II (Behavior Disorder/Learning Disability, Intellectual Disabilities, and Physical Disabilities). Additionally, I am interested in the decisions you make in the classroom and the strategies and practices you employ. I am aware you work in this profession, and I would like to invite you to participate. I have sent you a consent form that includes details of the study, including our potential role and responsibilities. If you are able to access this document at this time, we can discuss the research study as described in this consent form.

In order to understand your current position and observe your classroom structure and teaching practice, I would like to visit your classroom at least one time. I would like to interview you on three occasions (at your convenience and choice of location), so I can better understand what you believe about special education, goal setting, student potential, and critical dispositions. Your contribution to the discussion of what education and life experiences have shaped your professional dispositions is desired. Finally, any artifacts that you think may demonstrate your dispositions and beliefs and provide a

better understanding of the day to day operation of your classroom, for example—class schedules, lesson plans, objectives and instructional goals—would be appreciated. Each interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes. I would like to observe your classroom on a typical school day for approximately one hour.

All information gathered will protect your personal identity, the school district and building will not be identified, and all data you share will be devoid of student information.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to choose to end your participation at any time. Data collected from this research project will be published in my dissertation and may be shared in the form of written publications or conference presentations. In addition, data collected may inform future studies in this area.

I am so grateful for your time and willingness to consider participation in this research. I believe this research is valuable to the field and that educators can learn from one another. The insights and experiences you may share would potentially benefit students identified as eligible for special education, other teachers, and pre-service teacher preparation. Your thoughts, opinions, and experiences are valued. What questions can I answer for you?

## APPENDIX D

## ADMINISTRATOR'S CONFIRMATION

Dear Kathleen Saleh,

The (name of institution/organization) is pleased to collaborate with you on your project *An Exploration of Teacher Dispositions: Expectation of Potential*.

We understand that participating in this research will include classroom observations and conversations with the participating special education teachers. We had ample opportunities to discuss the research with you and to ask for clarifications. Furthermore, Kathleen Saleh will maintain confidentiality of all research participants and their district of employment throughout all phases of this project. According to our agreement, project activities will be carried out as described in the research plan reviewed and approved by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board.

We look forward to working with you, and please consider this communication as our Letter of Cooperation.

Sincerely,

(Name of representative)

(Title of representative)

## APPENDIX E

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Round 1 Interview Questions

Can you articulate what you think the word disposition means?

What do you see as the most critical disposition for an in-service special education teacher?

What are factors that impact your classroom decision-making?

Can you give examples of behaviors you exhibit that represent what you believe about your students and your role as an educator?

Depending on how long you have been associated with this learning community, can you give me examples of students who have “surprised” you with their performance and success?

If you do think there is limited progress for students identified for special education supports (meeting goals, amendments to goals, and exits—also post-secondary achievement), why do you think this is the case, given the legal mandates and professional standards?

Example: Annual Measureable Objective (AMO) for 11<sup>th</sup> graders in reading demonstrates that 37.9% of students identified for special education were proficient in reading compared to their non-identified peers at 83.2%

How frequently do your annual goals get met v. carried over to another school year?  
How many exits do you typically see from your program?

To what degree do your students participate in the general education curriculum? And or general education setting?

Do you see individuals as “victims”?

How would you describe your role as a special education teacher?

How do you describe “disability”?

Can you share examples of how you give your students voice and choice?

What does disability/ability look like in the context of your classroom?

How do you promote social justice?

What are your expectations for your students? (Without naming the student—describe the different way of being and your belief about his or her post-secondary life)

What are the inclusive practices you employ?

What social interactions do your students engage in?

What educational experiences have impacted what you believe about all students and potential?

What life experiences have impacted what you believe about all students and potential?

### Round 2 Interview Questions

What are factors that impact your classroom decision making?

Can you give me some examples of students who have exceeded your expected learning goals? To what do you attribute this success?

What are your thoughts about the identification of disability? Do your students identify themselves as disabled?

Is there a stigma associated with working in this environment, or with you and your team? Is there a stigma with being labeled as eligible for special education services? Do you think that impacts the students' perception or progress?

Can you share examples of how you empower your students?

How frequently do your students' annual goals get met? To what degree do goals get carried over from year to year? Do you have examples of either of these situations? Can you share some examples of goals your students have on IEPs, without identifying information? How many of the students in your room have similarly written goals?

How many exits from special education do you write a year?

Given the following example:

Annual Measureable Objective (AMO) for 11<sup>th</sup> graders in reading demonstrates that 37.9% of students identified for special education were proficient in reading—compared to their peers who are not identified at 83.2%

Why are students, who get specially designed instruction, not making progress? Can you share any examples of progress monitoring (without identification) that demonstrate your students' academic growth?

Can you share some post-secondary goals for a couple of your students? Do you envision them living independently? What types of employment do you foresee them pursuing?

What motivates you to do what you do each day?

Do you incorporate issues of social justice in your practice?

### Round 3 Interview Questions

Tell me about the culture of your school. And, then tell me about the culture of your classroom.

How do you make sure all students feel welcomed? Can you provide me with an example?

What do you understand as the biggest barriers to students developing friendships?

What is your hope for your students? You talked about student X several times, what do you imagine this student doing in 5 years? 10 years?

If you could change anything about your teaching/job, what would you change?

Describe the ideal classroom/teaching position.

Finally:

Have you ever thought about disability as a social construction?

What do you think it means to “assume competence” in the students? Do you have examples of how you might do this in your classroom? Do you think this has any impact on the student’s progress? If so, do you have examples?