Inclusive Education for All: Identifying Teacher Beliefs About Working with Students with Disabilities

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL: IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

By
Chelsea Sharek

December 2023
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL: IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL: IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By

Chelsea Sharek

December 2023

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Gretchen Givens Generett

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs K-12 teachers have when working with students with disabilities in a rural Pennsylvania school district. This study aimed to identify if teachers’ personal beliefs created biases about their students and school systems; thus, forming barriers and preventing an inclusive education when working with disabled students. Instrumentation for this quantitative study is the Multidimensional Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale (MATIES) survey. Findings suggest that some teachers at Sunnyside School District (pseudonym) hold personal beliefs that could create biases about their students and school system that may form barriers when working with disabled students. Future studies could expand beyond the small rural demographics of Sunnyside to include larger urban/suburban schools, gather insight into novice teachers’ personal beliefs regarding working with students with disabilities, create and implement an instrument in which scenarios regarding specific
student needs are detailed, and/or explore the perceptions that parents who have children with disabilities hold about teachers’ personal beliefs when working with their disabled children.

*Keywords*: belief fixation, beliefs, biases, deficit thinking, equity, free appropriate public education (FAPE), fixed mindset, growth mindset, inclusion, individualized education plan (IEP), least restrictive environment (LRE), local education agency (LEA), professional development, school system barriers, social desirability
DEDICATION

In memory and dedication of Ford Sniezek September 19, 2010 - November 6, 2020. Ford, you have touched my life in so many ways. Thank you for teaching me the importance of ensuring the successful inclusion and equitable education for all students. I hope I made as much of an impact on your life as you have made on mine.
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This process has been a dream of mine for many years. Due to timing and circumstance, there was a ten-year gap between obtaining my master's degree and beginning my Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. I genuinely believe that God has a plan in which he makes sure that the timing is right and surrounds us with supportive people who will help in attaining our goals, dreams, and aspirations. This holds true to my journey. Words cannot express my gratitude to the amazing, unwavering, and selfless supporters in my life.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my husband and children who have been my constant cheerleaders throughout this process. You are always providing me with unconditional love, support, and positivity. You are truly my “why,” and I could not have done this without you. I hope that I am providing you with the love and support that you provide for me on a daily basis.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for always telling me to reach for the stars and pursue my dreams. You instilled in me at an early age the importance of responsibility, perseverance, and courage. Your unwavering support will always be appreciated and something that I hope that I am always providing for my own children.

Thank you to my amazing students and wonderful parents. You teach me on a daily basis the importance of being an educator who is dedicated to all students’ social, emotional, and academic growth. I hope I have been able to teach you as much as you have taught me throughout the years. Parents, thank you for entrusting me with your kiddos. Your continuous support is much appreciated and does not go unrecognized.
My friend, mentor, and administrator, Dr. Emily Smith. Thank you for providing me with a gracious space in which I can just be me, unwind, relax, and vent as well as instilling in me the importance of always putting students first, providing all students with an equitable education, and advocating for students with disabilities. I don’t think you realize how important and beneficial our frequent porch nights are for my soul.

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Chapter One

Introduction

“When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become ‘normal’ in order to contribute to the world. We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging.”

— (Kunc, 1992, p. 38).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the beliefs and biases Pre-K-12 teachers have about working with students with disabilities at Sunnyside School District, a rural district located in the Northeast US. After 13 years of teaching alongside many high school, middle school, and elementary school educators who serve students with and without disabilities at Sunnyside, it has become apparent that some teachers hold personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities. These two separate ideals are imbedded in historical larger systems ideologies that support separating students with disabilities from their nondisabled peers. Thus, disabled students not receiving an inclusive education in which all students, no matter their abilities, are together in mainstream classrooms for the majority of the day (Schuelka, 2018).

According to Sunnyside’s Special Education Data Report for the 2020-2021 school year of the 1,371 students enrolled, 265 (19.3%) students received special education services. If some of these students were being appropriately accommodated for and included in each class and grade level, they would be receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. As a result, it is relevant to determine how teacher beliefs and biases are creating barriers when working with students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that restrict them from receiving an inclusive education. Therefore, this study has significance as it will examine numerous factors
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that can contribute to how teachers’ personal beliefs may create biases about their students and school system that create barriers when working with disabled students. Conclusively, the implications of the study can lead to future professional development opportunities in which teachers will be called to identify and challenge their current beliefs and biases, create a state of genuine doubt in which their beliefs and biases are altered, and be able to provide all students, no matter their functional needs, an inclusive education.

Problem Statement

The history of special education spans over 200 years. From the early 1800s to the present, individuals have been segregated, excluded, and judged based on their race, gender, socio economic status, and ability. Institutions have been created for students with disabilities to segregate them from their non-disabled peers, and parents needed to decide whether to send their children to these institutions or keep them at home where they would receive no educational support services. Furthermore, disabled students who are receiving their education in public school settings have been historically and currently pulled out of classes to prevent them from being a disruption to their non-disabled peers (Leiter, 2004, p. 1). As a result, school systems have been perfectly designed to obtain the results they produce in which certain students without disabilities are given more access and opportunities to be successful than students with disabilities who have and continue to be segregated and excluded from their peers as well as judged based on their functional needs. Consequently, these systematic inequities have percolated into the personal beliefs that educators possess about serving students with disabilities. These include, but are not limited to, believing that students without disabilities are able to be successful while students with disabilities are not (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001); students without disabilities should be given access to opportunities to further their social, emotional, and
academic growth, while students with disabilities should not (Leiter, 2004); students who are successful academically in school are motivated to learn because their parents value education while students who struggle academically are not motivated to learn because their parents do not value education (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004); and students without disabilities are able to learn and progress, while students with disabilities cannot (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). These personal beliefs that teachers possess about students with disabilities create deficit thinking biases about their students and school system that form barriers when working with students of various culturally diverse backgrounds (Valencia, 2015). Furthermore, these beliefs contribute to the overidentification of students with disabilities which deters these students from receiving the inclusive education they deserve.

Throughout my 13 years of experience as an educator at Sunnyside School District it has become apparent that some teachers hold these aforementioned deficit beliefs about their students with disabilities. This has become obvious through anecdotal observations and conversations that I have had with my colleagues as well as in scholarship base (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow, 2007; Fox et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2017a; Wilson et al., 2016). Some teachers complain about the additional time and effort needed to accommodate for students with functional needs. Others discuss the lack of training offered through the district that is crucial to appropriately accommodate and differentiate lessons for disabled students. Additionally, educators believe that students with disabilities have been placed into an inclusive setting in which the proper supports and services needed for them to be successful have not been provided. The most alarming conversations that I have experienced with colleagues is when they casually say that they do not want students in their classroom because they have a disability that will require the teacher to exert more time and effort toward class work preparation and making the
appropriate accommodations needed to their instruction so that the students receive an inclusive education. They further contend that they do not want the students’ behaviors, such as outbursts and meltdowns, to be a disruption to their non-disabled peers. For many teachers, their existing beliefs may conflict with the underpinning philosophy of inclusive education that provides the right to education for all students. The values related to inclusion are connected to interactionist ideology and encompass fellowship, participation, democratization, benefit, equal access, quality, equity and justice. Inclusion implements fellowship and participation in school culture and curricula for all students (Booth, 1996; Wilson et al., 2016). This conflict may prevent the implementation and sustained use of inclusive reform (Fox et al., 2021). Appraising inclusion as a barrier often times accompanies a deficit view of students at risk for school failure, especially when educational challenges are mainly explained by students’ deficits (Ainscow, 2007). Contrarily, the assessment of inclusion as an opportunity for education creates an approach that fosters diversity and considers students’ backgrounds as an asset for learning rather than an obstacle (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2017a).

I had a personal experience throughout my various years of teaching that made me question my personal beliefs about inclusion and working with students with disabilities. In doing so, I came to a moment of genuine doubt and realized that not all teachers possess the same beliefs about working with students with functional needs as I do. This occurred during my seventh year of teaching. I was given the privilege to have a student in my class who had a condition known as Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). This child’s immune system was too fragile for him to attend school in person; therefore, the special education teacher and I met with his mom and collaboratively determined that a robot, known as the VGo, would be the best assistive technology device that he could use to gain the most inclusive educational experience
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possible. This device allowed him to call into class each day where he would appear on a television screen, and the students would get so excited each morning when he called in to join our school family. He could communicate and participate with his peers and myself throughout all activities, was able to attend all field trips, and got to graduate from kindergarten with his classmates. I was honored to work in a role where the students and I collectively created such a special, accepting, loving, and inclusive educational environment.

Although this experience positively changed my life as an educator and as a human being, I unfortunately cannot say the same for some of the teachers who succeeded me. It would be reported to me that some of his teachers did not want to educate him due to the amount of preparation work it took to compile and send his work home a week ahead of time. Others complained about his mother and nurses being present during the school day and feeling like they were always being “watched.” One of the most heart-breaking reports was when an educator said that he should no longer be in their class because the students did not seem to want him there.

What I once thought was a completely inclusive, inviting, embracing, and loving experience for all had now seemed to become something so negative. This made me begin to consider the impact that educators’ personal beliefs had on students with disabilities. I started to wonder if teachers who created an inclusive classroom and were accommodating to the student had positive experiences while teachers who did not want to take the time and effort needed to appropriately accommodate for the successful inclusion of this student had negative experiences that may have created biases about the student and formed barriers when having him in their classroom. This is when I personally experienced genuine doubt in the belief that I once held that all educators wanted to provide all students, no matter their abilities, with an inclusive education.
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My belief shifted and currently stands that some educators possess personal beliefs that may create deficit thinking biases about their students with disabilities and school system that form barriers when needing to use accommodations in their classrooms (Browne, 2018; Peirce, 2022; Valencia, 2015). These barriers inhibit students with disabilities from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve.

According to the District’s Special Education Data Report for the 2020-2021 school year the district is above the state average for serving students with disabilities (19.3% Local Education Agency) (18.1% State). The 265 (19.3%) students who receive special education services are in the following disability categories: autism, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, and speech or language impairments. This means that almost 20% of the district’s students are receiving special education services such as learning support, behavior support, life skills, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy while at school.

Although previous research has been conducted that focuses on teachers’ personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school systems that form barriers when working with student with disabilities, a gap exists in research that focuses on the teachers’ beliefs and biases that may create barriers when working with students with disabilities at Sunnyside School District. Updated research on these factors could lend to effective professional development opportunities that challenge Sunnyside teachers’ current personal beliefs and biases, create a state of genuine doubt in which their beliefs and biases are altered, and provide the tools needed to allot these 265 disabled students with an inclusive education. Therefore, the research problem is that some teachers at Sunnyside School District hold personal beliefs that lead them to form biases about their students and school system. Furthermore, the teachers’ personal beliefs and
biases may form barriers when working with students with disabilities and prevent these students from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the personal beliefs Pre-K-12 teachers at Sunnyside School District have when working with students with disabilities; consequently, creating biases towards their students and school system that could form barriers when working with disabled students. The results of the survey implemented will garner an understanding of the beliefs and biases that teachers at Sunnyside may have. This information will help school leaders focus on pre-service education, professional development, inclusive curricula, and training that will provide teachers with the tools needed to support students with disabilities. This is crucial in ensuring that disabled students at Sunnyside receive an inclusive education.

**Research Questions**

1. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their students?

2. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system?

**Positionality Statement**

I would be remiss if I did not mention that I am an able-bodied person with no invisible disabilities. I cannot fully understand what students with disabilities experience on a daily basis and cannot speak on the lived experiences and inequities they face based solely on their functional needs. Thus, the way that I understand, perceive, interpret, and analyze teachers’ personal beliefs and biases about their students and school system that may create barriers when working with students with disabilities will differ from someone who were conducting this study and has a disability. As I analyze the data collected in this study, I will use my vast experience of
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working with students with various disabilities, observations and conversations with other educators, as well as literature from the field to help guide my understanding, thinking, perceptions, and interpretations of the data.

My position regarding this study is that I am an educator in the district where the research took place. I have been a student, teacher, and parent within this district and have been allotted the opportunity to work in all three buildings: elementary, middle, and high school. I spent most of my time as an educator, 13 years, in the elementary building. I was an instructional and physical paraprofessional for a kindergarten student for one year and a high school student for one year. Furthermore, I taught middle school English for one-year, taught kindergarten for 10 years, and taught first grade for two years. After 15 years of educating students with and without disabilities at Sunnyside, it has become apparent that some teachers hold personal beliefs and biases that create barriers when working with the district’s disabled students.

My experience as an educator is what draws me to my research. The aforementioned stated personal beliefs and biases that some teachers at Sunnyside School District possess can create barriers when working with students with disabilities and prevent them from receiving the accommodations needed to be successful. In addition, these beliefs and biases can potentially create a district culture that is not inclusive to students with functional needs. Therefore, this study holds great meaning to me because identifying Sunnyside teachers' personal beliefs about working with students with disabilities can improve education for the district’s disabled students. By conducting this study and analyzing teacher beliefs in an action-oriented way, better professional development opportunities and tools necessary to give students with disabilities a successful inclusive educational experience can be provided. As a result, teachers will be able to
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reflect and understand their own beliefs and biases about students with disabilities and will be able to work towards creating more opportunities in their classroom for disabled students.

**Extant Data from the Organization**

There have been several initiatives implemented at Sunnyside that support an inclusive educational experience for students with disabilities. They include but are not limited to Best Buddies, Club Hope, Special Olympics, Mikayla’s Voice Inclusion Assembly, disability awareness month, random acts of kindness and inclusion initiatives, lunch bunch, school store, community-based instruction trips, Kids of STEEL, STEAM Summer Camp, special education parent roundtable discussion nights, standards-based report cards, DIBELS progress monitoring, Accelerated Reader Program, and the creation of an outdoor learning space. The purpose of this section of the study is to show that the reason that students with disabilities are not receiving an inclusive education is not due to the absence of resources, access, or administrative support. Rather, it is the personal beliefs of teachers that create biases about their students and school system that form barriers when working with students with disabilities and inevitably lead to them not receiving the accommodations needed to be successful in their classrooms.

**Initiatives Accessible to All School Districts That Focus on Social and Emotional Progress**

Sunnyside utilized initiatives that all school districts have access to that focus on the social and emotional progress of students with disabilities. Best Buddies International is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that is dedicated to creating a global volunteer movement that provides opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) (Best Buddies, 2022, p. 1). The implementation of this program provided daily activities that fostered opportunities for students to form meaningful relationships with their peers. For example, kindergarten and first grade students were reading buddies on a weekly basis and a
partnership was formed with a local foundation that supports individuals with cancer. Students created art projects and crafts for patients who were undergoing cancer treatment and donated them to this foundation. Through this partnership, a walking event was created in which elementary students in grades PreK-5 participated. Students donated one dollar to wear a hat to school that day. Also, teachers allotted 15-30 minutes out of their day to take their students for a walk around the school campus. All proceeds from this event benefited individuals who were receiving cancer treatment.

The districts’ students also participated in the Special Olympics. Special Olympics is a global movement of people creating a new world of inclusion and community, in which every single person is accepted and welcomed, regardless of their abilities. The Special Olympics assists in making the world a better, healthier, and more joyful place one athlete, one volunteer, one family member at a time (Special Olympics, 2022, p. 1). In addition, district teachers and administrators participated in an annual Polar Plunge. The Polar Plunge is an event to raise funds and awareness for Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA). Plungers committed to “Freezin’ for a Reason” and raised money to dip a toe, wade, or jump into icy waters of a local River (Polar Plunge, 2022, p. 1).

Additionally, the district had their elementary students attend the Mikayla’s Voice Inclusion Assembly. Mikayla’s Voice celebrates diversity of all kinds by promoting kindness and friendship for everyone. This foundation began with one child but was never solely about her or her disabilities. Mikayla’s Voice transcends all differences and speaks to everyone. Although Mikayla never spoke a word, hers is a voice that all need to hear (Mikayla’s Voice, 2022, p. 1).

The elementary Student Assistance Program (SAP) team also created and implemented random acts of kindness and inclusion bulletin boards. Each bulletin board had envelopes
containing random acts of kindness suggestions. Students picked a card from any envelope, completed the act of kindness, and had their picture taken while performing the act to post on a collage wall; therefore, making a positive impact on school culture and climate. A picture wall collage was created in each hallway that displayed the students performing these daily random acts of kindness. The SAP team also encouraged teachers to pick a weekly “lunch bunch” group of some of their students. Once all students were given the opportunity to participate another round of “lunch bunch” would begin. This activity promoted students to create and sustain meaningful relationships with their disabled and non-disabled peers as well as their teachers.

Students were also encouraged to join the Kids of STEEL Program. Kids of STEEL is a free training program that helps to motivate kids and their families to get active and make healthy food choices. The program provided an official race and offered a tangible goal for kids to work toward throughout the school year (Kids of STEEL, 2019, p. 1).

Initiatives Created by Sunnyside That Focus on Social and Emotional Progress

Sunnyside created several initiatives that focus on social and emotional progress for students with disabilities. The district’s elementary students provided support and raised awareness for several disability categories during disability awareness month. General education teachers and the elementary principal also collaborated with the district’s elementary life-skills teacher to create and implement a tier one positive behavior initiative known as the school store. Additionally, students with disabilities were given several opportunities throughout their educational career to attend community-based instruction trips that aimed to form community partnerships and give students the exposure to explore future job opportunities. In addition, the high school life skills class built an apartment where students with disabilities are taught skills that will help them live independently and be prepared for future job employment.


**Initiatives Accessible to All School Districts That Focus on Academic Progress**

Sunnyside also implemented many initiatives that are accessible to all school districts that focus on academic progress. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of literacy skills. They are designed to be brief (one minute) fluency measures that can be utilized to regularly detect risk and monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills of students in kindergarten through eighth grade. DIBELS was created to measure recognized and empirically validated skills related to general reading outcomes. Each subtest has been rigorously researched and revealed to be a reliable and valid indicator of early literacy development. When implemented as recommended, DIBELS results can be used to evaluate individual student development and allot grade-level feedback toward validated instructional objectives (DIBELS, 2021, p. 1).

The research-based subtests of the DIBELS assessment are predictive of later reading proficiency and contribute to a composite score that is the single best predictor of later reading development. The measures are compatible with many of the Common Core State Standards in Reading, specifically those for Foundational Skills. Combined, the measures create an assessment system of early literacy development that permits educators to determine student progress readily and reliably in kindergarten through eighth grade (DIBELS, 2021, p. 1).

DIBELS progress monitoring tools were utilized to best prepare elementary students for this standardized test. Parent volunteers came into some classrooms to assist with fluency centers. These centers were rotating one-minute centers where students practiced the following skills that would be assessed on the End of Year DIBELS assessment: letter naming fluency, nonsense word fluency, word reading fluency, oral reading fluency, oral reading accuracy, and phoneme segmentation. All progress monitoring tools used were accessible, free of charge, on
the DIBELS website. The teachers who utilized these progress monitoring tools reported a large amount of growth in their students’ DIBELS scores.

Additionally, the district provided licensure for teachers to utilize the Accelerated Reader Program. Accelerated Reader puts students in the driver’s seat. Students are guided while engaging in quizzes and activities to help sharpen their reading skills by providing authentic practice that encourages growth. Personalized goals were set that help students stay focused on the factors that matter most for reading growth and help monitor their progress and provide feedback to keep learners on track. Individual reading recommendations were provided that utilized students’ interests and reading levels to recommend titles. Students could also self-select from over 200,000 choices. As a result, “just reading” changed into high-quality reading practice that ignited growth. Accelerated Reader reading quizzes monitored comprehension, while literacy skills and vocabulary quizzes expanded student learning and constructed the mastery of skills. Detailed reports were generated to provide insight into students’ progress, and paired with Renaissance Star Reading, students’ mastery of focus skills that are aligned to state-specific learning standards were tracked (Renaissance, 2022, p. 1).

Teachers could incorporate the accelerated reading program into their classrooms daily. If utilized, students were given the opportunity to choose a book from their specific reading level to read. After reading the book independently, students completed an electronic Accelerated Reader (AR) test on that book. Students earned points depending on how many questions they answered correctly. They were given two opportunities throughout the school year to spend their points at the school AR Store on toys, games, books, etc. They also received awards at the end of the year for reaching their monthly AR goal.
Initiatives Created by Sunnyside That Focus on Academic Progress

Sunnyside created several initiatives that focus on the academic progress of students with disabilities. The district offered a special education parent roundtable discussion night for all parents who have students in the district with an IEP. This opportunity highlighted what was going on in the special education department, discussed the Cyclical Monitoring process, addressed concerns that parents of a child with disabilities may have, stated the current special education department’s areas of strengths and areas of needed improvement, presented special education law and regulations as well as state and federal mandates that drive instruction, identified family networking and support, and reviewed the district’s special education plan. Once these topics were discussed, an open forum was welcomed where parents were given the opportunity to highlight their child’s areas of strength and areas of need, ask questions, discuss concerns, share contact information with other parents, and discuss extracurricular activities that took place outside of the district. This was a great opportunity for the teachers in attendance to form meaningful relationships with parents who have children in the district with disabilities. It also gave the district an opportunity to receive parental feedback that could be utilized to identify areas of strength in the special education department as well as areas of needed improvement.

A STEAM summer camp and a Kickoff to the New School Year summer camp for elementary students (grades K-5) were also offered. The STEAM camp was a three-day camp that exposed elementary students to fun activities that included science, technology, engineering, art, and math through fun, engaging, and inclusive means. The intent of the Kickoff to the New School Year summer camp was to review the previous year's skills and a preview of what was to
come for the upcoming school year. As a schoolwide Title building, any student was welcome to attend.

Standards-based report cards were created and implemented in some grade levels. In standards-based classrooms the focus is on a student’s performance over multiple opportunities, not simply the grading and averaging of tests and quizzes. A standards-based report card emphasizes “learning” over “earning,” and each quarter provides students multiple opportunities to practice, attain, and demonstrate proficiency on the PA Standards and the district’s performance benchmarks. Through identifying clear benchmarks, the students’ knowledge and skills were measured continually; therefore, stretching students to perform at their highest level of potential.

In addition, an outdoor learning space was created on campus for teachers and students to utilize daily, weather permitting. This gave the teachers and students the freedom to be creative in choosing what types of activities they would like to complete while using this area. As a result, students were given the opportunity to complete academic, social, or emotional activities in a unique space while getting fresh air. Students could enjoy what the outdoors had to offer while building knowledge and relationships alongside their peers and teachers.

As noted, there are resources, services, programs, accessibility, and administrative support in this district. Teachers are provided with the aforementioned opportunities to create an environment that is more inclusive for students with disabilities. Demonstrating these available teacher resources is important to the study because it helps to identify that despite programming that addresses the need for opportunities in the district are available, these opportunities do not provide a space for teachers to grapple with their personal beliefs and deficit biases about working with students with disabilities nor do they address entrenched systemic
INEQUITIES. Additionally, teachers do not seem to believe that they have the time or training to effectively implement these activities into their already full schedule. Furthermore, teachers appear to lack the desire to implement these activities into their classrooms. This has been observed through anecdotal observations and conversations with colleagues where they say they are not going to even try to implement the activities into their classrooms because they do not think they will be effective, and they do not have the time to try to see if they will have a positive impact on their students. As a result, it is imperative to identify if teachers’ personal beliefs are creating biases about their students and school system that are forming barriers when working with students with disabilities. A better understanding of the personal beliefs and biases that teachers may have that create barriers when working with students with functional needs can lead to pre-service education, professional development opportunities, inclusive curricula, and training that may have a positive impact on their beliefs and allot the skills and tools educators need to provide all students with disabilities with an inclusive education.

**History of Special Education**

There are three well defined eras in the history of special education in the United States. They are Early Reform (1800-1860), Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950), and Contemporary Reform (1950-Present). Throughout each of these special education time periods, several themes emerged and bore evidence in each historical era by way of societal attitudes, enacted legislation, and educational provisions. These themes encompassed the treatment of individuals with disabilities and are categorized by the following: societal and cultural trends, altering conceptions of disability as a qualitative or quantitative phenomenon, changing the significance of nature and nurture, and the new not necessarily being better than the old (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 92). The institutional, systematic, and personal beliefs that people possessed over two
hundred years ago about individuals with disabilities’ inferiority, segregation, and exclusion are still being experienced by school institutions, systems, and teachers today. For example, teachers still believe that students with disabilities are unable to learn, should not be included in classrooms with their non-disabled peers, and have families that do not value education. As a result, current teachers possess beliefs and biases that create barriers that stifle the education of students with disabilities. If disabled students were being appropriately accommodated for in each class and grade level, they would be receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. A more in-depth analysis on this topic will be discussed in chapter two.

**Theoretical Framework**

When examining the value of teachers’ personal beliefs and biases about working with students with disabilities, a variety of theories in relation to this subject surface. For this study's intent, belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system barriers will be examined.

**Belief Fixation Theory**

Belief fixation theory was created by Charles Peirce. He argues that beliefs are fixed, guide our desires, and shape our actions. He states that beliefs are stubborn and resistant to change and are so strong that they tend to persist despite evidence to the contrary (Peirce, 2022). He further contends that beliefs can only be altered when genuine doubt is experienced and a person recognizes the inadequacy of their beliefs (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 179). Peirce identifies the following four sources of belief fixation: tenacity, authority, a priori, and experimentation. These four sources as well as growth and fixed mindset will be used in this study to classify different types of educators as well as help identify if they have personal beliefs
that may create biases about their students and school systems that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities (Peirce, 2022).

Belief fixation theory is used to support the idea that it is not in educators’ capacity to fixate ample beliefs but the ability of de-fixating inadequate ones that is imperative to providing disabled students with an equitable education (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). De-fixating beliefs is not an effortless process, especially in school systems. Teachers possess a powerful need to hold onto familiar personal beliefs, biases, theories, rules, and other habits regarding working with students with functional needs as well as directly connecting their beliefs to the public image they portray (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). If de-fixation of beliefs were to take place educators fear that they could project an image of inconsistency and even of recklessness. Thus, the effort to de-fixate identity related beliefs attempts to de-fixate identify itself. This attempt is seen as a major threat that is full of personal and political consequences and faces strong resistance from many teachers (Dascal & Dascal, 2013).

**Deficit Thinking Model**

The deficit thinking model refers to the belief that students (particularly those of low income, racial/ethnic minority groups) fail in school because these students and their families possess internal deficits that thwart the learning process. This could include limited education, motivation, and inadequate family support (Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking places blame on the victim rather than examining how school systems are designed to obstruct certain students from learning (Valencia, 1997). The theory claims that poor schooling performance is rooted in the students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are exculpatory (Valencia, 1997).
Although the deficit thinking model has focused primarily on students of color in the literature, it also extends to students with disabilities. Teachers place blame on disabled students rather than exploring how school systems are designed to obstruct students with disabilities from learning and make it difficult to provide the appropriate accommodations necessary for students with functional needs to be successful in their classrooms (Browne, 2018). Additionally, teachers contribute student failures to the lack of family support as well as a deficiency on the value of education (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Due to these personal beliefs, deficit thinking biases about their students and school system are created that form barriers that do not allow students with disabilities to receive an inclusive education.

Furthermore, deficit thinking beliefs such as low expectations of the educability of discounted students commonly translates to teachers’ curricular interventions that include non-challenging seat work, ability grouping, tracking, and neglect (Valencia, 2015). This discrepancy (pseudoscientific nature of deficit thinking as well as the prevalence of school failures) rests in the alluring nature of deficit thinking. Because deficit thinking is dependent on simplistic hypotheses and presumed deficient internal attributes of individuals to describe poor student academic outcomes, it renounces sound analysis to account for school failure (Valencia, 2015). Furthermore, deficit thinking creates barriers that ignore destructive meso-level school realities, practices, and policies that include school segregation, underqualified teachers, language suppression, and curriculum differentiation (Valencia, 2015).

**Systematic Issues**

Issues at a systematic level can play a key role in teachers possessing personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school systems that form barriers when working with students with disabilities that deter these students from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. Teachers contend that the Common Core Standards as well as standardized
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

assessment already put their students with functional needs at a disadvantage because they are grade-level based and their students with disabilities are already performing at levels that are in many cases way below their current grade level (Browne, 2018). Although teachers are given the opportunity to differentiate and accommodate for disabled students during their learning time, when it comes to the assessments, students are expected to take the test at their current grade level. This forms frustration for the students and teachers. As a result, teachers believe that their students with IEPs are already set up for failure and will never be able to bridge the gap between themselves and their non-disabled peers (Browne, 2018).

Also, teachers claim they have received little to no training on how to successfully incorporate the Common Core Standards into their classroom (Browne, 2018). Although educators believe that students with disabilities could benefit at least during instructional time by having the Standards broken into smaller sections and creating hands-on learning activities that are aligned to the Standards, they do not feel fully comfortable incorporating them into their classrooms because they believe that they have been inadequately trained. Consequently, teachers believe that the time spent differentiating lessons and creating hands-on experiences is in vain because they are not certain that they are doing it correctly in the first place (Browne, 2018). As a result, teachers do not want to spend the time needed to accommodate for their students with functional needs; therefore, teachers are not providing all disabled students with the engaging, hands-on, multi-sensory learning experiences that are crucial for success in a school system (Browne, 2018).

In consequence, these theories evaluate teachers’ personal beliefs, student beliefs, and system beliefs. These theories create a framework that works to investigate teachers’ negative beliefs and biases and assist in explaining if barriers may be created when working with students.
Identifying Teacher Beliefs About Students with Disabilities

With disabilities. These theories help observe and learn from teachers struggling with allocating an inclusive education for all students, no matter their abilities. As a result, a clearer understanding of the sources of teacher deficit thinking and why they sometimes choose to blame students’ failures on external family factors will be provided (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). This new understanding will assist in creating better ways to encourage critical self-reflection that has the capability to break barriers and encourage the adoption of effective strategies to successfully provide an inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Overview of Methodology

This study uses quantitative research methods to better understand the factors related to teachers’ beliefs and biases when working with students with disabilities. Instrumentation for this study was the Multidimensional Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale (MATIES) Survey. The target population was Pre-K-12 teachers within the Sunnyside School District. The study occurred during the winter of 2023. Data were analyzed using Google Sheets.

Rationale and Significance

Because 265 of the 1,371 students in this school district currently have been identified and receive special education services there is a great chance that most, if not all, of the teachers in this district will be instructing these students or future students with disabilities at some point throughout their career. Even if teachers do not work with this group of students, all teachers must examine their personal beliefs and biases. Teachers need the chance to identify and grapple with existing personal beliefs that may create deficit thinking biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when serving students with disabilities as well as the chance to become equipped with the skills and tools needed to provide disabled students with an inclusive educational experience.
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A better understanding of the beliefs and biases that teachers possess that create barriers when working with students with disabilities can lead to pre-service education, future professional development opportunities, inclusive curricula, and training that can have a positive impact on teacher beliefs and allot the skills and tools educators need to provide all students with functional needs an inclusive education.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study’s findings and recommendations cannot be generalized to all school districts. Rather, they are limited to only districts with similar demographics as Sunnyside’s. Additionally, the notion of exploring a complex phenomenon like bias via a purely quantitative instrument is a limitation. Although this descriptive quantitative instrument focused on what/when/how questions, it did not consider why teachers’ personal beliefs are creating biases about their students and school system that can create barriers when working with students with disabilities.

Another limitation in the current study is the researcher is a teacher, parent, and community member in the district being investigated. The reason this is a limitation is the respondents may have felt that they needed to answer the survey questions in a certain way, not only to be viewed in a more positive light but also to appease their colleague who they work with on a daily basis. This is known as social desirability. Social desirability occurs when respondents provide answers on topics that lend to portraying themselves in a positive light. Consequently, the validity of the results is a limitation when social desirability bias is considered. This may have also been the reason that there was a low response rate and non-equal groups of respondents (based on buildings) which are two additional limitations of this study.
Lastly, teacher feedback from those who participated in the survey revealed that questions on the MATIES Survey were too broad in nature. They had a difficult time rating statements because they may be answered differently based on the severity of various students’ disabilities. Recommendations for all of the identified limitations are discussed in Chapter Five.

A Note on Language

Because language is dynamic and nuanced and changes rapidly along with social norms, perceptions, and opportunities for inclusion, some terms will not be used in this study. Terms such as differently-abled, challenged, and handi-capable are often viewed as condescending. By shying away from mentioning disability, individuals erase historical oppressions that individuals with disabilities endure as well as uphold the notion that disability is something to be ashamed of (Rahman, 2019). Additionally, the word special is entrenched because it can be utilized as a euphemism but also can be used technically (e.g., “special education”) (Rahman, 2019). Because of this, there is a want to move away from this word as well. In addition, there is acknowledgment that terms such as “special needs” are established to introduce nondisabled parents and loved ones of children with disabilities to an opulent and complex world of disability access, inclusion, accommodation rights, and systems of support (Rahman, 2019). Thus, this term will not be used as well. In consideration of the aforementioned reasons, the following non-exhaustive, non-definitive language for considering disability equity will be utilized throughout this study (Rahman, 2019).

- *Person/Individual(s) with a Disability*

- *Student(s) with a Disability*

- *Disabled Person/Individual(s)*

- *Disabled Student(s)*
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

•  *Functional Needs*

Although the aforementioned terms will be used during this study, the most important aspect to remember is to respect others’ choice for how they want to be identified. Language around disability is complex and currently there is no universally accepted term for every individual. Even terms that are thought as most acceptable like *people with disabilities* and *disabled people* are not universally accepted by individuals in varying populations of disability (Ferrigon, 2019). As Cara Liebowitz referenced, individuals with intellectual disabilities usually prefer *people-first language* (people with disabilities), where the Autistic and Deaf communities both strongly prefer *identity-first language* (disabled people) (2015). A person who chooses identity-first language concedes that disability is intertwined into their identity, where a people-first language advocate can decide to focus on the person that is not defined by their limitations. Hence, in order to be respectful towards others, it is commonly unoffending to default to the most acceptable term by that community. The best approach, as many disability advocates suggest, is to utilize the term that the individual prefers (Ferrigon, 2019).

**Definition of Key Terminology**

- *Beliefs*- an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists.
- *Barrier*- an obstacle that prevents progress or access.
- *Belief Fixation*- beliefs are fixed and guide our desires and shape our actions (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 179).
- *Bias*- prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually considered unfair.
- *Deficit Thinking*- a way of thinking about something that blames the victim (Valencia, 1997, p. 1).
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

- **Equity**- the quality of being fair and impartial.

- **Fixed Mindset**- when one believes their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits (Dweck, 2016, p. 4).

- **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)**- mandatory regulation that all students with disabilities in a district’s jurisdiction must be provided supplementary aids and services that will produce educational benefit regardless of severity of disability and free of charge to families (Fenell et al., 2019).

- **Growth Mindset**- when one thrives on a challenge and does not see failure to describe themselves but as a springboard for growth and developing their abilities (Dweck, 2016, p. 4).

- **Inclusion**- students with disabilities are immersed with their non-disabled peers throughout the school day and have the opportunity to learn alongside them (Fenell et al., 2019).

- **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)**- a plan or program developed to ensure that a child with an identified disability attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.

- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**- a component of IDEA that mandates students with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Fenell et al.).

- **Professional Development**- the process of identifying goals and learning new skills to help employees grow and succeed at work.
Summary

This study will investigate the beliefs and biases Pre-K-12 teachers at Sunnyside School District have when working with students with disabilities. A quantitative approach will be used to assess these individuals’ perceptions within the Sunnyside School District. Chapter two will review the related literature with concepts in this study particularly in relation to belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system issues.
Chapter Two

Review of Literature

“The gap between the abilities and capacities of children related to their learning, adjustment and development found at the time of their birth, may further be widened by the nature of the environmental difference encountered by them in their nourishment and education.”

— (Parveen, 2015, p. 2)

This chapter provides an outline of the history of special education specific to each era spanning from the 1800s-present. It also identifies several themes that emerged and bore evidence in each historical era by way of societal attitudes, enacted legislation, and educational provisions which led to court cases and laws that ultimately supported the education and inclusion of students with disabilities. It will be argued that although legal cases have made the inclusion of disabled students a legally binding responsibility of school districts and provide ample evidence of disparate treatment based on abilities, legal rulings do not change individual beliefs and biases (Peirce, 2022). Recent research suggests that teachers continue to hold beliefs and biases about working with students with disabilities that create barriers that restrict educational opportunities for this student population. Belief fixation theory, deficit-thinking model, and school system barriers will be utilized to further explore, explain, and support this argument as well as guide the purpose of this study and aid focus on improvement as a learning process (Browne, 2018; Peirce, 2022; Valencia, 2015).

Disablism/Ablism in Policy and Practice

Throughout the history of special education, society displayed “disablism” and “ablism”. Disablism can be defined as “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed
Disabilities” (Kumari-Campbell, 2009). Disablism negatively forms the values and the material conditions surrounding people with disabilities and states that there could be nothing worse than being disabled, and as a result, oppresses individuals with disabilities and treats disabled people unfairly (Dolmage, 2020).

Instead of believing that there could be nothing worse than being disabled, ableism positively values able-bodiedness. In fact, ableism makes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness essential (Dolmage, 2020). Ableism unfairly favors non-disabled people and believes that non-disabled people are more valuable members of society than disabled people. In an ableist society, it’s assumed that the “normal” way to live is as a non-disabled person (Sense, 2023). It views disability as sycophantic, invisible, disposable, and less than human while representing able-bodiedness as ideal, normal, and the mean or default (Dolmage, 2020).

Some overlap exists between ableism and disablism as well as what they can look like. Disablism is a more current word. Some disability activists prefer to use the word “disablism” as opposed to “ableism” because they think it makes it apparent that disablism has nothing to do with a disabled person’s “ability”. Rather, it is a form of discrimination like racism or sexism (Sense, 2023). Generally, ableism can be utilized to recount the way society and people are inclined to favor non-disabled people (Sense, 2023). Disablism can be used to delineate more direct, conscious acts of discrimination or abuse against disabled people (Sense, 2023). Throughout the history of special education, society has displayed forms of disablism and ableism toward individuals with disabilities. The following section will connect disablism and ableism to the different eras of special education and will show how they both oppressed individuals with disabilities and segregated them from the rest of society.
The History of Special Education.

Many recent reviews of the history of special education in the United States focus on reforms from the 1960s to the 1970s which consequently infer that the field is reasonably new. Reviews of the history also demonstrate that progress through policies designed specifically to promote equitable outcomes and inclusive practices for students with disabilities within public school systems is fairly recent. The right to a free and appropriate education for all American children along with the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, Public Law 94-142), currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was only warranted and held up by law in 1975. Nonetheless, this recent era of reform is not unparalleled. The history of disability advocacy and the development of special education in the United States originated a century earlier when reformers engaged in altering the difficulties people with disabilities were experiencing, particularly through changing societal attitudes, instituting legal rights, and guaranteeing training and education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 91). Figure 1 describes the different eras of special education.
### Figure 1

*Eras in the History of Special Education in the United States*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800-1860</td>
<td>Early Reform Era</td>
<td>• Interest in people with disabilities was prompted through philosophical thought, medical and scientific advancement, and economic motivation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Improved societal attitudes, the founding of multiple institutions for training and teaching, and legislation to protect people with disabilities formed (Spaulding &amp; Pratt, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-1950</td>
<td>Stagnation and Regression</td>
<td>• Philosophical thought, empirical inquiry, and economic pressures caused society to seek ways to explain, control, and eliminate disability and deviance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Eugenics arose to solve social problems and economic troubles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intelligence tests were developed to identify, measure, and segregate disability from society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Individuals with disabilities were segregated in separate classes or schools (Carey, 2009; LaNear &amp; Frattura, 2007; Richards, 2004; Trent, 1994; Van Drenth, 2005; Yerkes, 1923).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-Present</td>
<td>Contemporary Reform</td>
<td>• Societal views of disability changed due to medical advances in early identification and treatment of disabilities (Winzer, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents began advocacy efforts to change public attitudes and secure governmental assistance (Carey, 2009; Dybwad, 1990; Trent, 1994; Spaulding &amp; Pratt, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Court cases were won, and laws were passed that mandated schools to provide education to all children (Gartner &amp; Lipsky, 1987; Spaulding &amp; Pratt, 2015, p. 100; Yell et al., 1998).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• There were and still are differences in philosophical views regarding inclusion of students within general education classrooms (Spaulding &amp; Pratt, 2015, p. 91).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are three well defined eras in the history of special education in the United States. They are Early Reform (1800-1860), Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950), and Contemporary Reform (1950-Present) (see Figure 1). For thousands of years before the turn of the 18th century people with disabilities were faced with the unambiguous deprivation of exploitation, exclusion, expulsion, and in some cases, execution (Crissey, 1975; Heller, 1979; Winzer, 1998). During this time, people displayed disablism. Society judged families with children with functional needs; therefore, causing parents to hide their children with disabilities from public view (Dybwad, 1990). Minimal extensions of charity were often done to mollify the conscience of the benefactor rather than to meet the needs of the recipient (Crissey, 1975). Furthermore, people with disabilities were seen as less than human and qualitatively different from the rest of society (Carey, 2009; Trent, 1994; Winzer, 1998). Human intellect, the ability to reason, was argued to be the ethos of humanness, and philosophers believed that if one of the human senses were lost, knowledge must be lost as well (Brocket, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 94). Because society believed that disability was inhuman and deviant, people with disabilities were moved from the public eye to institutions and hospitals (Carey, 2009; Winzer, 1998).

By the dawn of the 19th century, however, philosophical thought, medical and scientific advancement, and economic motivations drew interest to people with disabilities. Education reform began during this time and was known as the common school movement. The common school movement aimed to provide a free and efficient school system for all citizens and was dedicated to responsible citizenship and moral education (McKoy, 2022). Improved societal attitudes, founding of multiple institutions for training and teaching, the common school
movement, and legislation to protect people with disabilities caused early reform for special education to begin to take root.

_Era of Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950)_

Philosophical thought, empirical inquiry, and economic pressures experienced in the latter part of the 1800s caused society to look for ways to explain, control, and eliminate disability and deviance. During this era, society exhibited “ableism.” Instead of believing that there could be nothing worse than being disabled, ableism positively values able-bodiedness (Dolmage, 2020). Ableism can be seen in eugenics, the study of how to organize reproduction within a human population to improve the occurrence of heritable characteristics that are deemed desirable. During this era, eugenics emerged as a philosophy to resolve what society viewed as problems (Blacker, 1947). Individuals with disabilities were considered one of these problems. Some people thought that if they could control the reproduction of people with disabilities, they could eliminate disability altogether. As a result, many disabled individuals were being unwillingly castrated and sterilized so they could not reproduce (Blacker, 1947). The choice of having a family of their own was stripped away from many people in this population because others thought that they should not be able to procreate due to the possibility of having a disabled child (Blacker, 1947).

In addition, intelligence tests were created as an instrument to identify, measure, and segregate disability from society (Carey, 2009; Van Drenth, 2005; Yerkes, 1923). If students did not score high enough on the intelligence test they were deemed unable to be successful in a school setting and were not given the opportunity to progress alongside their non-disabled peers socially, emotionally, or academically (Carey, 2009; Van Drenth, 2005; Yerkes, 1923). Rather, they were segregated into institutions with other students with disabilities so they would not be a
disturbance to the non-disabled students who were attending public schools (Winzer, 1993). This segregation from school systems inevitably isolated them from society as a whole. As a result, the ablism incentives of eugenics and intelligence tests, although originally created to extinguish disability altogether, impeded the forward progression of special education through reduced funding. Furthermore, incentives increased instructional methods that centered around control rather than the inclusion of students with disabilities (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Richards, 2004; Trent, 1994). Although this era did not show much forward progression towards the inclusion and equity of students with disabilities, this would begin to change in a few short years.

**Contemporary Reform Era (1950-Present)**

Following World War II, societal views of disability changed again due to factors including medical advances in early identification and treatment of disabilities (Winzer, 1993). In addition, parents in the United States who were knowledgeable about special education started to unify advocacy efforts to change public attitudes and ensure government assistance (Carey, 2009; Dybwad, 1990; Trent, 1994). Parents who had children with disabilities began to form groups and fought for services for their children through litigation and legislation, respectively (Leiter, 2004, p. 1). What started as fundraisers to elicit empathy and charity for children’s institutions grew to lobbying first for additional schools and later for community-based services. As a result, parents would no longer have to choose between keeping their children at home where they would receive no educational services or sending them to an institution where they would be segregated from society (Leiter, 2004, p. 1).

Some of the most influential laws that were passed during this era to ensure the inclusion and equitable education of students with disabilities were The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), The Americans
with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESEA was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson who believed that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal" (U.S. Department of Education, 2023c). From its inception, ESEA was a civil rights law. ESEA presented new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for textbooks and library books, funding for special education centers, and scholarships for low-income college students. In addition, the law provided federal grants to state educational agencies in order to enhance the quality of elementary and secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2023c). On November 29, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). By adopting this landmark civil rights plan, Congress opened public school doors for millions of children with disabilities and created the foundation of the country’s dedication to guaranteeing that children with disabilities be provided with opportunities to develop their talents, share their gifts, and contribute to their communities. The law ensured access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to every child with a disability. Every child with a disability was diagnosed under the following 13 disability categories: Autism, Emotional Disturbance, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visual Impairment Including Blindness. The IDEA sustains and protects the rights of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a).

Another law, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), was signed in 1990. ADA proscribed discrimination based on disability by public entities, even if they received federal
financial assistance. The types of discrimination prohibited involved inequitable access to educational programs and facilities, denial of a free appropriate public education for elementary and secondary students, and refusal to implement or inappropriate implementation of academic adjustments in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

More recently, on December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. This bipartisan measure reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and included provisions that would assist in ensuring the success of students and schools. ESSA aimed to facilitate equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students. It also, for the first time, required that all students in America be held to high academic standards that would best prepare them to succeed in college and careers and ensured that crucial information be provided to educators, families, students, and communities by way of annual statewide assessments that measured students' progress toward these high standards. ESSA also helped to support and expand local changes that included evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators as well as supported and grew the administration's historic investments in increasing access to high-quality preschool. Additionally, this law maintained the expectation that there would be responsibility and action to achieve positive change in the lowest-performing schools where groups of students were not making progress, and where graduation rates were low over an extended period of time. ESSA and ADA have guided an increased significance on access to the general education curriculum, the delivery of services for young children from birth through five, transition planning, and responsibility for the achievement of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023c).
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

As court cases were won and laws were passed supporting those with disabilities (see Figure 3), schools were mandated to provide an education for all children (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Yell et al., 1998, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 100). Programs were put into place to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings. These included Multi-Tier Support Systems (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

MTSS incorporates increased instructional time, interventions, and improved educational outcomes for students in general and special education. The NASP Position Statement, “Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students” (NASP, 2009) suggests the MTSS comprehensive framework to focus on the academic and social, emotional, and behavioral development of children and youth. The MTTS framework embodies principles of response to intervention (RtI) and positive behavioral interventions and reinforces (PBIS) and merges a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and evidence-based practices for inscribing barriers to student learning and discipline (Utley & Obiakor, 2015). MTSS interventions are based on tiers, or levels of support (i.e., primary, secondary, tertiary). Primary supports are instructional practices that are applied class wide by the teacher. Primary interventions may include classroom arrangements, active supervision, and the posting of class rules in a visible area of the classroom. Secondary and tertiary interventions are more strategic and focused on groups of students with similar needs (secondary supports) and individual student needs (tertiary supports) (Mahoney, 2020, p. 2).

RTI is a multi-tiered instructional schoolwide approach that focuses on the needs of all students, including struggling learners and students with disabilities. It combines assessment and intervention within a multi-level instructional and behavioral system to escalate student

While there is no particular RTI framework in which the Department of Education subscribes, the main characteristics that support all RTI models include the following: students receive high quality research-based instruction in their general education setting, monitoring of student performance is continuously conducted, all students are screened for academic and behavioral problems, and multiple levels of instruction that become progressively more intense, dependent on the student’s response to instruction, are implemented. Many Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have implemented successful RTI strategies into their schools. This ensures that children who do not respond to interventions and are possibly eligible for special education and related services are referred for evaluation while those children who just need intense short-term interventions are allotted with such (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

UDL is a framework that aims to design appropriate learning activities that can be effective for all students. It includes three principles that were developed based on cognitive neuroscience research and the learning process. The first principle provides several means of representation to the students in acquiring, processing, and integrating information and knowledge. This allows various types of learners to show how they understand and perceive the information given to them. Instruction may include showing information in the form of images or sounds rather than using written language. The second principle provides a wide range of teaching strategies appropriate to the needs of students and allows a variety of options for students to choose from in order to express what they already know. This includes oral, written,
or drawn expressions. The third principle allots multiple means of engagement that allow a wide range of choice that supports and increases student motivation. Instruction includes free choice to work in groups or work alone. In addition, students have the choice to present information orally to the entire class or to create a presentation via Google Slide or PowerPoint where peers can view it independently. There is no one means of engagement that can motivate or improve the involvement of all learners, so this third principle provides numerous options to motivate and increase the interest of all students (Dewi et al., 2019, pp. 2-3).

Although most of these frameworks focus on the assessment, learning, and intervention of all students, the multi-sensory, hands-on, free-choice approach that each of them uses assists in ensuring the success of students with disabilities. These frameworks present the option of showing what students know through multiple strategies instead of expecting all students to learn, present, and be motivated in the same way. As a result, students with disabilities who learn, communicate, and behave in different ways than their non-disabled peers are given the opportunity to be successful in an inclusive school setting.

The increase of these special education services also created philosophical differences about the inclusion of students within the general education classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kavale & Forness, 2000). Some people believed, and still believe, that students with disabilities should be included in public schools with their non-disabled peers. Others believed, and still hold the belief, that disabled students should remain in institutions and segregated from society (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kavale & Forness, 2000). Similar to the early era of reform, the era of contemporary reform was, and continues to be accompanied by societal and cultural trends that guide public perception of individuals with disabilities and stabilizes the emphasis between nature and nurture. A more in-depth comparison of nature and nurture will be discussed below.
Special Education Themes

Throughout each of these special education time periods, several themes emerged and bore evidence in each historical era by way of societal attitudes, enacted legislation, and educational provisions. These themes encompassed the treatment of individuals with disabilities following societal and cultural trends and altered conceptions of disability as a qualitative or quantitative phenomenon. Therefore, the special education themes changed the significance of nature (the belief that intellect and academic development may be explained by genetics) and nurture (the belief that intellect and academic development are accredited to the effects of the environment) (Moore, 2006; Peebles-Wilkins, 2007). These themes also altered the importance of new not necessarily being better than the old that argues that just because something is new does not necessarily mean that it is better than the old (Kaufmann, 1999, pp. 265-272). In fact, it can be a lot worse (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 92). Figure 2 describes the themes that emerged during the eras of special education and align each theme with aspects of the theoretical frameworks (belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system issues) that will be further explored.
### Figure 2

*Themes of Special Education in the United States*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Theme 1 | Societal and Cultural Trends              | • People with disabilities were treated depending on contemporary societal norms and attitudes (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).  
  • Aligns with deficit thinking model. |
| Theme 2 | Qualitative or Quantitative Differences   | • The qualitative model believes that people with disabilities “are different and deviant—they learn, perceive, and think in ways that are unlike the normal” (Winzer 1993, p. 380, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 93).  
  • The quantitative views differences “as a matter of degree, not kind-exceptional people develop and function much as others do, but their progress may be slower and their achievement more restricted” (Winzer 1993, p. 380, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 93).  
  • Aligns with belief fixation theory. |
| Theme 3 | Shifting Emphasis on Nature or Nurture    | • Supporters of nature believe intellect and academic development may be explained by genetics.  
  • Supporters of nurture accredit effects to the environment (Moore, 2006; Peebles-Wilkins, 2007, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 93).  
  • Aligns with deficit thinking model. |
| Theme 4 | New is Not Necessarily Better Than the Old | • Just because a special education reform is new does not necessarily mean that it is better than the old. In fact, it can be a lot worse.  
  • In some cases, it left people with disabilities in more perilous situations than before (Moore, 2005, as cited by Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 93).  
  • Aligns with school system issues. |

**Theme 1: Societal and Cultural Trends**

Despite differing philosophical and ideological positions, several of special education’s most renowned advocates and historians have concluded that how people with disabilities are treated is dependent on contemporary societal norms and attitudes that make up their culture.
Culture is the “total socially acquired life-way or life-style of a group of people. It consists of the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society” (Harris, 1975). Culture is learned and is correlated with groups of people. Its content encompasses a vast range of phenomena that includes norms, values, shared meanings, and patterned ways of behaving (Birukou, et al., 2009). Wolfensberger (1969) contends that “human management practices almost invariably follow prevailing cultural values” (p. 53). Furthermore, Csapo (1984) states, “Education serves the prevailing economic, political, and social ideologies of a society” (p. 212). Additional societal attitudes “concerning the care, education, and training of exceptional individuals reflect more general cultural attitudes concerning the obligations of a society to its individual citizens… [the] care and training of disabled individuals has followed historical trends, not created them” (Winzer, 1993, p. 383). Culture is so fundamental to this work because historically and currently, the way individuals with disabilities are treated is dependent on the culture and societal trends of that particular time.

In relation to education, the ways students with disabilities are treated, fairly or unfairly, highly depends on the specific culture of the school district. Because of this, Drucker (1959) has coined the well-known saying, in educational settings, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Although effective strategies are important and necessary in a school system, creating a positive school climate and culture that is inclusive to students with disabilities is most imperative. A school culture that is inclusive and inviting for all students, no matter their functional needs, encourages everyone in the school community to treat those with disabilities in a fair, kind, and respectful manner. On the contrary, schools that have created a disablist culture in which an “us” group (individuals without disabilities) is established and sees themselves as better than or
superior to the “them” group (individuals with disabilities) will make those with disabilities feel secluded, abnormal, and inferior to their non-disabled counterparts. Although this trend was commonly observed during the era of Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950), it can still be seen in some school institutions and systems today. For example, some institutions have educators who believe that students with disabilities should not be educated alongside their non-disabled peers (Leiter, 2004). Reasons for this include beliefs regarding the inability to learn, poor performance on standardized tests, and disruption to students (Browne, 2018; Winzer, 1993). As a result, students with disabilities are not receiving the appropriate accommodations needed to be successful in the classroom and on standardized assessments (Browne, 2018). This leads to the question of why, after over 100 years, are injustices for students with disabilities still occurring?

**Theme 2: Qualitative or Quantitative Differences**

The second theme is qualitative or quantitative differences. Society has and continues to swing from quantitative to qualitative conceptions of disability (Telford & Sawrey, 1982). The qualitative model believes that people with disabilities “are different and deviant- they learn, perceive, and think in ways that are unlike the normal" while the quantitative views differences “as a matter of degree, not kind-exceptional people develop and function much as others do, but their progress may be slower and their achievement more restricted” (Winzer, 1993, p. 380). It is important to note that in reading the characteristics of the qualitative and quantitative model, it is apparent that there is a reversal in the typical meaning of qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative studies usually focus on observations and interviews that ultimately tell a story and are focused on human lived experiences while quantitative studies focus on measurable and hard data. Although this may seem peculiar, this is in fact the characteristics of the qualitative and quantitative model of the history of special education.
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Shifting between qualitative and quantitative conceptions of disability are obvious in each historical era and bear influence on the varying ways that people with disabilities have been perceived and treated by society. Throughout each era of special education history, this theme held true in educational institutions. Some teachers possessed a disablist qualitative model of thinking where they believed that students with disabilities were not normal, behaved poorly, and were unable to learn and be successful like their non-disabled peers (Winzer, 1993). Contrarily, other teachers possessed a quantitative model of thinking where they believed that although students with disabilities may learn differently and at a different pace than their non-disabled peers, they were still capable of learning and should receive the appropriate accommodations necessary for them to be successful in a school system (Winzer, 1993). The teachers with qualitative personal beliefs created biases about their students and school system that formed barriers that did not allot their students with disabilities the educational opportunities they deserve while teachers who held quantitative personal beliefs created an inclusive school environment where all students, no matter their abilities, were given the opportunity to be successful in every area: socially, emotionally, and academically. This leads to the question: Why do some of today’s current educators still possess a qualitative view about students with disabilities and believe that they should not be educated in public school settings, behave poorly, and are unable to learn as much as their non-disabled peers” (Winzer, 1993)?

Theme 3: Shifting Emphasis on Nature and Nurture

The third theme is shifting emphasis on nature and nurture. Dependent on societal trends and the reigning philosophical and “scientific” advances navigating them, human development has been typically viewed as either an issue of nature or nurture. Supporters of nature believed intellect and academic development may be explained by genetics while supporters of nurture
accredited effects to the environment (Moore, 2006; Peebles-Wilkins, 2007). A significance placed on nature claims that if personal characteristics are predetermined and fixed, spending time and resources on training and education is prodigal. Contrarily, emphasizing nurture increases the significance of the care, education, and experiences allotted for students with disabilities. History discloses differing societal dispositions pertaining to the value of special education due to transferring emphasis on nature and nurture (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Educators who were supporters of nature held a deficit thinking mindset where they believed that students with disabilities failed in school because they and their families possessed internal deficits that thwarted the learning process. This may have included limited education, motivation, and inadequate family support (Valencia, 2015). Their deficit thinking placed blame on the students and their families rather than exploring how school systems were created to deter certain students from learning. They claimed that the root of poor schooling performance was the students’ alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that excluded students from learning were vindicated (Valencia, 2015). This deficit thinking created barriers that ignored catastrophic school realities, practices, and policies which included school segregation, underqualified teachers, language suppression, and curriculum differentiation (Valencia, 2015).

On the contrary, educators who supported nurture believed that students with disabilities should receive an equitable education. They promoted and supported the social, emotional, and academic progress of these students by accommodating and differentiating lessons accordingly. They also created an inclusive and welcoming school environment and provided experiences that fostered the opportunity for students with disabilities to learn alongside and build meaningful relationships with their non-disabled peers. This third theme can lead to the
questions: Why do some of today’s teachers still support the nature point of view (Moore, 2006; Peebles-Wilkins, 2007)? Why do teachers blame inherent qualities that their students possess to justify their need for extra support in a school system (Valencia, 2015)? What are the reasons why teachers do not analyze the flawed educational system and realize that it has, and continues to be perfectly designed to exclude and segregate students with disabilities (Browne, 2018)? Why do educational systems fail in providing disabled students with the same educational experiences as their non-disabled peers (Browne, 2018)?

Theme 4: New is Not Necessarily Better Than the Old

Kaufmann (1999) contends that because something is new does not necessarily mean that it is better than the old (pp. 265-272). In fact, it can be a lot worse. There is a path toward ensuring the inclusion and equitable education of individuals with disabilities from the beginning of the 19th century to the present; however, this path is flawed by periods of stalled progress and regression. This regression, in some cases, left people with disabilities in more perilous situations than before (Moores, 2005). As previously mentioned, during the Stagnation and Regression Era (1860-1950), eugenics arose as a philosophy to resolve social issues and economic hardships. Intelligence tests were also developed to identify, measure, and segregate students with disabilities from society. This ableist motivation to ultimately eliminate human disability stalled the forward growth of special education through reduced funding and implementing more instructional methods that were geared toward controlling individuals with disabilities rather than supporting them. Sadly, as states passed and enforced compulsory attendance laws, individuals with disabilities were regularly segregated into separate classrooms or schools so they were not able to interact with or influence other non-disabled children (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Richards, 2004; Trent, 1994).
Although inclusion is more commonplace today, there are still many institutions that have been created for students with disabilities where they can live and attend school. These institutions keep students with disabilities segregated and distant from the rest of the world. Students are not given the opportunities to live, learn, work, and form meaningful relationships with their non-disabled peers. Additionally, they are not being seen as valued and participatory members of the communities in which they live (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Richards, 2004; Trent, 1994). This disablist exclusion is much like the segregation that was being experienced by individuals with disabilities before the early reform era (1800-1860). This begs the question, could supporting these institutions cause school systems to regress even farther back from the Early Reform Era (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015)? Furthermore, could systems regress to a place where school institutions pass so much judgment on individuals with disabilities that they try to hide and conceal them from public view (Dybwad, 1990)?

A more current circumstance that has negatively impacted disabled students and fits within the theme that the new is not necessarily better than the old is COVID-19. Even though all students were negatively affected by this pandemic, students with disabilities were impacted more severely (Kaden, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Tindle et al., 2017). Although technological advances provided many students with devices that could be used to attend school virtually, students with disabilities were not able to receive the in-person supports and services that they needed to be successful. Disabled students require in-person accommodations made throughout each school day in order for them to succeed, and they were unable to receive these supports due to schools shutting down and lack of accessibility to in-person instruction (Young & Donovan, 2020). Students with disabilities also did not receive in-person speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and life skills instruction that they received regularly while at school.
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

(Schaeffer, 2020). Additionally, disabled students were stripped from the social experiences and interactions with their peers that they were receiving on a daily basis. Although having the possible access to on-line learning opportunities, these social, emotional, and academic experiences could not be replicated virtually; specifically for students with disabilities who learn, interact, and communicate in different ways than their non-disabled peers (Young & Donovan, 2020). This pandemic segregated students with disabilities much like the early reform and stagnation era and proved that the new is not necessarily better than the old (Kaufmann, 1999). In fact, it was a lot worse.

**Summary of the History of Special Education**

In reviewing the three distinct eras in the history of special education in the United States and exploring the themes that emerged throughout these eras, it is apparent that some of the same disablist and ableist injustices that were happening to students with disabilities in the 1800s and 1900s are still occurring today. It makes one question, why are educators still possessing the same negative and deficit beliefs about students with disabilities that they had over 200 years ago (Crissey, 1975; Heller, 1979; Winzer, 1998)? What has transpired between history, institutions, and school systems to make current educators with much more pre-service training, professional development, technology, and access still believe that students with disabilities are unable to learn and should not receive an inclusive education alongside their non-disabled peers (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001)? The answer is apparent. School institutions and systems have been created to produce this way of thinking amongst educators. These overarching notions of inadequacy, segregation, and exclusion of individuals with disabilities have percolated through school systems from the beginning of their existence and have put into place certain policies, laws, and segregated actions towards students with disabilities that create biases and barriers that do not
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

allow this population of students to receive the inclusive education that they deserve (Carey, 2009; Winzer, 1998).

**Historical Legal Cases**

A variety of legal cases have helped to shape current special education beliefs and policies. Figure 3 describes monumental court cases that ensured the inclusion of students with disabilities.

**Figure 3**

*Timeline for Special Education Legal Cases and Policies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td><em>Brown v. the Board of Education</em></td>
<td>This court ruling set the tone for the elimination of segregation. Although geared toward segregation of students of color, the ruling had implications for the segregation of students with disabilities as well (Winzer, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Panel on Mental Retardation</td>
<td>President John F. Kennedy convened to determine ways in which to support those with disabilities. This initiative opened the door for conversations regarding those with disabilities (Department of Administration Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td><em>Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC) v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania</em></td>
<td>Suit claimed that the commonwealth was in violation of providing access to public education for children with disabilities who could benefit from such schooling (334 F. Supp. 1257).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>P.L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act established</td>
<td>This law established regulations which guaranteed handicapped children FAPE. LRE was first mentioned in this law (Leonardi, 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>Board of Education v. Rowley</em></td>
<td>In this supreme court ruling, FAPE was discussed in the realm of the meaning of appropriateness for a child with a disability and what outcomes IDEA expected for students. The court ruled that services had to be reasonably calculated for students to receive educational benefit (Winzer, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Case Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td><em>Roncker v. Walter</em></td>
<td>This case was known for the “Roncker Portability Test.” This test looked at the possibility that a segregated setting would be more appropriate for a child. The second tier of this test considered if the services provided in the segregated setting could be transported to the neighborhood school and be provided in a less restrictive setting. If so, the school district was responsible for this provision to maintain LRE (Yell, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education</em></td>
<td>This case set the standard for a two-part test in determining if schools met their obligation in providing FAPE under IDEA. The first prong of the test was to determine whether the child’s needs could be met satisfactorily in the general education setting with the use of supplementary aids and services, while the second prong examined if a student with a disability were included with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate when placed in a special setting (Yell, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Gaskin v. Pennsylvania Department of Education</em></td>
<td>In the suit, the families called for IEP teams to consider whether the goals in a student’s IEP could be worked on and met in the general education setting with the use of supplementary aids and services before considering a more restrictive setting. In the general education classroom, responsibility was increased for districts to provide appropriate accommodations and related services. With the 2005 settlement agreement, PDE made systemic changes over special education. These changes included the LRE mandate in monitoring that districts complied with state and federal requirements. The settlement also established an LRE advisory panel (Silla-Zaleski et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H.</em></td>
<td>The ruling yielded a four-factor test to look at placement decisions. The first factor was comparing the educational benefits of the general education classroom compared with that of the special education classroom. The second factor examined nonacademic benefits of educating students with students without disabilities. Lastly, the third factor examined the impact of the student’s presence on the teacher and other peers, and the final aspect analyzed the cost factor of mainstreaming (Yell, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District</em></td>
<td>Behavioral needs of a student with a disability were at the forefront of the placement decision in this ruling. The</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
student displayed aggressive behaviors threatening to the other students in the classroom. The district decided that the child’s needs could be met in a separate school. The child’s parents disagreed and proceeded with a due process hearing to have the child back in the general education setting with a one-on-one paraprofessional. The hearing officer ruled in favor of the district based on the four-factor test from Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H. (1994). The hearing officer found that the student being educated in the general education classroom would violate factors one and three. The paraprofessional would not make that much of a difference in the behaviors, and the other students’ safety was being violated (Yell, 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education</td>
<td>The court favored the district’s decision of placing a student with aggressive behaviors and autism in a separate school and developed a three-part test in its ruling. They argued that mainstreaming was not the LRE when the student would not receive educational benefit from the model, that any minimal benefit from mainstreaming would be overshadowed by benefits that could be achieved in a more restrictive educational setting, and that the student was a disruption to others’ education in the general education classroom (Yell, 2012).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously stated, many steps have been taken over the past two centuries to ensure the education of students with disabilities. Although the history of special education can be traced back over 200 years, legal cases, in addition to ESEA, IDEA, ADA, and ESSA, that took place during the Contemporary Reform Era (1950-present) have been instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of students with disabilities. Federal legal cases include Brown v. the Board of Education (1954) (Winzer, 1993), Panel on Mental Retardation (1962) (Department of Administration Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2019), The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) (Leonardi, 2001), Board of Education v. Rowley (1982) (Winzer, 1993). State legal cases include Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC) v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971) (334 F. Supp. 1257), P.L. 94-142,
Roncker v. Walter (1983) (Yell, 2012), Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education (1989) (Yell, 2012), Gaskin v. Pennsylvania Department of Education (1994) (Silla-Zaleski et al., 2007), Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H. (1994) (Yell, 2012), Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District (1994) (Yell, 2012), and Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education (1997) (Yell, 2012) (see Figure 3). These cases have placed a legal responsibility on the day-to-day operations of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to provide their students with disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE). Without these legal cases, students with disabilities may still be living and receiving their educational services within an institution and be segregated from the rest of the world.

Although special education law has come a long way in protecting the educational rights of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a; U.S. Department of Education, 2023c) there is still a lot of work to be done in regard to protecting the social and emotional rights of disabled students. As aforementioned, the shutdown of schools due to COVID-19 had a huge impact on students with disabilities’ mental health. Although having possible access to on-line learning opportunities, social and emotional interactions with their peers could not be replicated virtually for disabled students who learn, interact, and communicate in different ways than their non-disabled peers (Young & Donovan, 2020). Even though students with disabilities are back in school settings, the impact that COVID-19 had on their mental health is still a concern (Young & Donovan, 2020).

While an understanding of mental health and its management may have increased substantially in recent years, there are still many areas of uncertainty when considering this
complex issue in connection to students with disabilities (Rose et al., 2009). Amongst the challenges teachers face are those associated with the assessment of emotional well-being in students who may display behaviors that are commonly related to a ‘label’ such as autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) (Rose et al., 2009). Reiss (1993) discusses the difficulties of identifying the mental health issues of students with functional needs. He raises specific attention to the possibility of attributing atypical behaviors to a diagnosed learning difficulty instead of recognizing it as symptomatic of a mental health problem. The difficulty of identifying mental health difficulties in those with PMLD often entails students being overlooked or changes in behavior being misinterpreted (Carpenter, 2004; Davies, 2004; Sheehy & Nind, 2005). This was an area of concern before COVID-19. With the added mental health stressors of students with disabilities due to the pandemic, further examination of these issues as well as laws and policies being put into place to protect and support the mental health of disabled students may be crucial if teachers and other professionals are to ensure that the mental health needs of students with disabilities are not being misinterpreted and are being appropriately supported and accommodated for in a school environment (Rose et al., 2009, Young & Donovan, 2020).

Teachers’ Beliefs Towards Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

Even though the previously mentioned legal cases have made the inclusion of students with disabilities a legally binding responsibility of school districts and provide ample evidence that people have been treated disparately based on their abilities, legal rulings do not change an individual’s beliefs and biases. Recent research suggests that teachers continue to hold personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school system that form barriers that restrict students with disabilities from receiving an inclusive education (Lindsay, 2007). This causes
consideration as to whether or not teachers’ beliefs and biases regarding working with students with disabilities impacts serving these students with functional needs (Lindsay, 2007). Belief fixation theory, deficit-thinking model, and school system barriers will be utilized to answer the aforementioned question by focusing on the personal beliefs that educators possess that may create biases towards students and school systems that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities; therefore, preventing disabled students from receiving an inclusive education.

A main component for the development of inclusive education policies has been the right of children with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools. Yet, the chances of inclusive education actually taking place depends heavily on teachers’ underlying belief systems and attitudes towards inclusion for students with disabilities (Lindsay, 2007). “Teachers’ belief systems” (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 477) refer to a set of dynamic and integrated teacher views that are related to a certain topic that leads their perceptions, guides them to explain incoming information and events in a certain way, and acts as an individual’s “working model of the world” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). The subcomponents of a teacher’s belief system often get intertwined (Miesera et al., 2019; Woodcock & Jones, 2020). Understanding teachers’ belief systems provides insight into the psychological encounters that drive teachers’ actions. Such knowledge is crucial to advise teacher training (e.g., teacher preparation, professional development) that fosters teachers’ implementation of reforms such as inclusive education.

Teachers’ belief systems about the inclusion of students with disabilities can clarify gaps between policy and practice. Three inter-related aspects of teachers’ belief systems: teachers’ cognitive appraisals (e.g., attitudes), emotional appraisal (e.g., feelings), and self-efficacy (e.g., agency to teach inclusive classrooms) can be utilized to further explain teachers’ beliefs.
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Cognitive appraisal alludes to a teacher’s cognitive evaluation of an attitude object (i.e., whether it is favorable or unfavorable) (Ajzen, 2002). More specifically, teachers’ cognitive appraisals of inclusive education comprise beliefs about the effectiveness of including students with diverse functional needs in regular classrooms and if inclusion is viewed positively or negatively (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This assessment builds on teachers’ cognitive depictions of inclusive education that mirror teachers’ thoughts about the costs and benefits of inclusion for classroom management, teachers’ own work, and for the students themselves (including those with and without disabilities) (Forlin et al., 2010).

In comparison to cognitive appraisals, emotional appraisals focus inclusion at a personal level (Savolainen et al., 2012). Teachers’ emotional appraisals most often occur when their cognitive evaluation of reform specifies that the reform is personally applicable and will impact their well-being (Gregoire, 2003). Where some teachers feel threatened by inclusive education because they fear the additional work (Pearman et al., 1997), foresee stress (Jenson, 2018), or encounter feelings of threat that relate to a lack of resources (Sharma & Desai, 2002), others feel less troubled regarding inclusion (Forlin et al., 2010). Evidence on teachers’ emotional appraisals varies. Frequently, teachers range from being only marginally concerned to very concerned about using inclusive practices (e.g., Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

Self-efficacy beliefs in regard to inclusive education refer to teachers’ resources for coping as well as their expectations of being capable to support students in specific situations. Teachers are more likely to act if they believe they can successfully execute a reform effort (Bandura, 1997), such as inclusion. These self-beliefs provide a cognitive lens in which teachers assess whether or not to engage in efforts to execute reform practices (Liou et al., 2019). Teachers with low self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices may feel unable to include
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

students with disabilities in their classrooms. Consequently, they provide minimal effort to adapt their teaching in order to meet the needs of disabled students (Sharma et al., 2012). Additionally, many teachers feel ill-prepared for the tasks that can take place in inclusive settings, such as responding to difficult behaviors or making accommodations to daily lessons and activities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). They may form concerns about the lack of personal and material resources that are needed to effectively implement inclusion (Sharma et al., 2009).

Contrarily, high self-efficacy beliefs about inclusive practices are connected with stronger intentions to teach inclusively (Miesera et al., 2019; Opoku et al., 2020), a stronger readiness to implement effective inclusive practices in their classrooms (Avramidis et al., 2019), and greater implementation of inclusive teaching practices (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020).

In summary, teachers’ cognitive appraisals, emotional appraisals, and self-efficacy beliefs lend to the extent in which teachers are likely to implement inclusive education reform in their classrooms for students with disabilities. Belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system issues will aide in providing a more detailed description as to how teachers’ aforementioned personal beliefs can create biases about their students and school systems that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities. This can lend to future professional development opportunities in which teachers will be called to identify and challenge their current personal beliefs and biases, create a state of genuine doubt in which their beliefs and biases are altered, and be able to provide all students, no matter their functional needs, an inclusive education.
Theoretical Sources

A variety of sources were used throughout this study to support the research. Figure 4 demonstrates the theoretical sources utilized in this study and their main areas of focus.

Figure 4

*Theory and Focus*

Belief Fixation Theory

Beliefs are the acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists. Every individual holds personal beliefs that begin to form during their youth by way of cultural traditions and lived experiences. These personal beliefs are well established by the time a student begins college and are formed by personal experience, schooling and instruction, and formal knowledge (Richardson, 1996, as cited in Pohan & Aguilar, 2001, p. 160).

In relation to education, this would mean that pre-service teachers’ belief systems are already formed by the time they begin their college educational experience (Richardson, 1996, as cited in Pohan & Aguilar, 2001, p. 160). Because attitudes, beliefs, and expectations direct and
navigate how teachers respond toward varying students and can lend to differential expectations and treatment based on race and ethnicity, social class, gender differences, and ability, it is crucial for pre-service teachers to be surrounded by professors and other educational professionals that hold personal beliefs that are inclusive, accepting, open-minded and equitable. Influence from open-minded individuals can increase the chances of pre-service teachers’ reflection regarding negative personal beliefs. This reflection can allow pre-service teachers to challenge and alter former beliefs and biases that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities in order to possess equitable qualities when they become classroom teachers (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Contrarily, if pre-service teachers are surrounded by professors and educational professionals who do not support inclusive practices for students with disabilities, they may be negatively influenced (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Educators who do not believe in inclusive education for disabled students and who place blame on the students and school systems may cause pre-service teachers to view this way of thinking as normal; consequently, manifesting their beliefs and perceptions as well as mirroring their non-inclusive ideals (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001).

Regardless of the pre-service experience, practicing teachers’ attitudes represent a network of various personal beliefs that are utilized to predict behavior. These personal beliefs also arbitrate knowledge and action (behaviors/ skills) (Bandura, 1982, as cited in Pohan & Aguilar, 2001, p. 160) and impact teachers’ perceptions and judgments; therefore, influencing their behavior in the classroom (Pajares, 1992). These personal beliefs towards students with disabilities can be projected in one of two ways. One side of the spectrum is believing that all students are able to learn, should be provided with an equitable education, and should receive an inclusive education in their least restrictive environment (Winzer, 1993). The other end of the
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spectrum; however, is believing that students with disabilities are unable to learn, should not be educated alongside their non-disabled peers, and have parents who do not value education (Valencia, 2015; Winzer, 1993). These personal beliefs create biases about their students and school system that form barriers and play a huge role in determining the quality of education that students with disabilities receive. Furthermore, these beliefs regulate whether the social, emotional, and academic gap will close or continue to grow amongst this population of students. Belief fixation theory will be utilized to describe how powerful teachers’ personal beliefs, whether right or wrong, are in influencing the educational approach and practice used to educate their students with disabilities.

Belief vs. Doubt. As previously noted, belief fixation theory was created by American Philosopher, Charles Peirce. He saw truth as the end of science and contends that personal beliefs are fixed and guide one’s desires as well as shape their actions. Peirce (2022) notes that personal beliefs allot individuals with a sense of comfort and satisfaction. They explain a set of structures and provide a sense of the world. He argues that personal beliefs are resistant to change and possess so much strength that they tend to persist despite evidence to the contrary (Munby, 1982, as cited in Pajares, 1992, p. 317). Peirce further states that personal beliefs can only be altered when one experiences genuine doubt and recognizes the inadequacy of their beliefs (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 179). It is only when one confronts new experiences or territory that is unfamiliar to them and outside of their comfort zone that they experience apprehension about the logic of their structures. Peirce is insistent that doubt must emerge from lived experiences and utilizes the term ‘genuine doubt’ to allude to this authentic, situated form to differentiate it from the more methodological form of doubt. He contends that it is not enough
to pretend to doubt. A true change of personal beliefs will only transpire if it settles the irritation of a felt doubt (Peirce, 2022).

Peirce (2022) compares beliefs and doubts. He contends that the feeling of believing is an indication of there being some habit which will decide one’s actions where doubt is an agitated and discontented state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief. The latter is a tranquil and acceptable state which we do not wish to circumvent or change to a personal belief in anything else. Only the inception of doubt can bring into question the beliefs one holds. Doubt activates inquiry which produces the rejection or modification of the doubtful belief and its ultimate replacement by another (Dascal & Dascal, 2013, p. 1). Conversely, one clings tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what they believe. Therefore, both doubt and belief have positive effects, though quite different ones. Belief does not make one act but places them into such a condition that they behave in some certain way, when the occasion presents itself. Doubt, on the other hand, invigorates individuals to inquiry until it is destroyed (Peirce, 2022, p. 7). It beckons them to find out, from the consideration of what they already know, something else which they do not know. It is not sufficient to just be skeptical of a belief and then seek ways to justify the original belief (Peirce, 2022). For real change of belief to occur one must know what things are worth believing and what things need to be set aside (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 187).

**De-Fixation of Beliefs.** The above situation leads to the following questions: Why do some teachers hold personal beliefs about working with students with disabilities that create biases about their students and school system that form barriers, and why do these educators not want to alter these personal beliefs? The major strain of rational thinking and conduct as well as the solution to significant issues in life is located not in one’s capacity to fixate ample beliefs but
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rather the ability of de-fixating inadequate ones (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). De-fixating beliefs is not an effortless process. In education, teachers possess a powerful propensity to cling onto familiar beliefs, biases, theories, rules, and other habits regarding working with students with disabilities that they believe ‘work’. Even if teachers are cognizant of their imperfections, they are still hesitant to change because of the fear of the unknown (Dascal & Dascal, 2013).

Additionally, teachers’ personal beliefs are not solely internal mental states. Rather, these personal beliefs are also directly reflected in the public image that teachers project. This is known as their ethos, ‘face,’ or reputation. Teachers believe that their public image as an educator must fulfill precise requirements such as consistency, stability, productivity, efficiency, and they have an obligation towards themselves and their school system to sustain this image (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). This may be a main source of resistance to massive de-fixation of personal beliefs about working with students with disabilities where inclusion, acceptance, differentiation, accommodation, flexibility, and empathy are crucial components to ensuring that these students are receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. If de-fixation of personal beliefs occurs, educators fear that they may project an image of inconsistency and even of recklessness where they are abandoning teaching practices that they have implemented and relied on for a long time that are productive and efficient to implement new teaching methods and activities that are more hands-on, multi-sensory, accommodating, and flexible (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). Therefore, the effort to de-fixate identity related beliefs attempts to de-fixate identify itself. This such attempt is considered a major threat full of personal (denial of individual autonomy, loss of grip on oneself or self-control) and political (denial of collective autonomy, questionability of claims to collective self-determination) consequences which in turn face strong resistance from many teachers (Dascal & Dascal, 2013).
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Four Sources of Belief Fixation. Figure 5 demonstrates the difference between educators with a growth mindset and with a fixed mindset.

**Figure 5**

*Types of Educators: Growth v. Fixed Mindset*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tenacious Educator</strong></th>
<th><strong>Authoritative Educator</strong></th>
<th><strong>A Priori Educator</strong></th>
<th><strong>Experimentation Educator</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Open-minded</td>
<td>- Not open-minded</td>
<td>- Creature of habit</td>
<td>- Relies on research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Challenges beliefs</td>
<td>- Fixed in beliefs</td>
<td>- Open to change</td>
<td>- Relies on evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Believes all can learn</td>
<td>- Teach by giving direct instruction</td>
<td>- Collaborative</td>
<td>- Relies on data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not discouraged by failure</td>
<td>- Beliefs create barriers</td>
<td>- Challenges beliefs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sees challenges as learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- May change their beliefs too easily</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Growth Mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fixed Mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fixed Mindset but altered to Growth Mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Growth Mindset</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout Peirce’s work, he identifies four sources of belief fixation. They are tenacity, authority, a priori, and experimentation (see Figure 5). Because Peirce was such a philosophical thinker, he uses the word *sources* to refer to a person’s internal being rather than its common definition of being a book or document used to provide evidence in research (Peirce, 2022).

The first source, tenacity, is when people cling to a personal belief despite knowing the contrary to preserve self-identity (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 180). One who adopts the method of tenacity will discover that others think differently from them, and it will occur in a saner
moment, that their opinions are quite as good as their own. As a result, their confidence in this belief will be shaken. The method of tenacity is strong, simple, and direct. Educators who follow it are renowned for their decision of character (Peirce, 2022, pp. 10-18).

In terms of education, a tenacious educator is one who is open to self-reflection, adopting new teaching initiatives, exploring new curriculums, being able to see things from other perspectives and points of view, and regularly challenges their own beliefs and adjusts them accordingly. Tenacious educators usually fall on the side of the spectrum that believes all students can learn, should be provided with an equitable education, and should receive an inclusive education in their least restrictive environment. They hold a growth mindset and believe that “human qualities, such as intellectual skills can be cultivated,” (Dweck, 2016, p. 4) and students can get smarter. They are not discouraged by failure and do not see challenges as failing but rather learning experiences (see Figure 5).

Authority is the next source of belief fixation. Authority is the best method for fixating beliefs for a mass of human beings (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 180). Whenever there is an aristocracy, a guild, or any association of a class of people whose interests depend, or are supposed to depend, on established propositions, there will be some indication of this natural product of social feeling. An authoritarian does not feel vindicated in surrendering the interests of others for the sake of the greater good as they may their own personal interests. Thus, it is natural that sympathy and fellowship should therefore create a ruthless environment in which the leaders tend to their own personal interests rather than focusing on what is best for all individuals involved (Peirce, 2022, pp. 11-12).

In relation to education, an authoritative educator is one fixed in their personal beliefs and ways of doing things. They are not open to new teaching initiatives, improvement plans,
curriculums, etc. When authoritarian educators are approached by educational leaders they may be combative and refuse to be open to new beliefs that will best serve their students. Their combativeness is rooted in disablism, (the differential or unequal treatment of people based on actual or presumed disabilities) and ableism (viewing able-bodiedness as ideal, normal, and the mean or default) (Dolmage, 2020). As a result, biases and barriers are likely to be created about working with students with disabilities; thus, the students not receiving the inclusive education they deserve. These educators are usually at the other end of the spectrum from the tenacious leaders and believe that students with disabilities are unable to learn, should not be educated alongside their non-disabled peers, and have parents who do not value education. These educators possess a fixed mindset and believe that “human qualities are carved in stone” (Dweck, 2016, p. 4). They think students are smart or not and failure means they are not. It is that simple. Furthermore, they believe if students can contrive successes and circumvent failures at all costs, they can continue to be smart. These educators believe that “struggles, mistakes, and perseverance are just not part of the picture” (Dweck, 2016, p. 4) (see Figure 5).

The third type of educator is referred to as a priori. The very essence of a priori is to think as one is inclined to think. No institution can tackle the responsibility of regulating their opinions upon every person. Only the most crucial opinions can be attended to, thus leaving the action of natural causes on people’s minds (Peirce, 2022). In most educational settings, there are teachers that hold a wider sense of social feeling and see that people in other environments have held to differing doctrines from those which they have been programmed to believe. It is apparent that the mere accident of having been taught as these educators have and having been surrounded by the manners and associations they have has caused them to believe as they do (Peirce, 2022). It is difficult for these educators to resist the reflection that there is no reason to rate their own views
at a greater value than those of others; thus, raising doubts in their minds. As a result, individuals converse together about matters in different lights, which gradually develops personal beliefs in harmony with natural causes (Peirce, 2022, pp. 12-13). The action of dialogue in a community where views are compared and alternative sets of beliefs are appreciated and can be equally utilized leads individuals to consider changing their personal beliefs.

In education, an a priori educator is one who has been teaching in a certain way for a long time because they are surrounded by a team of teachers who have been doing the same thing for several years and are reluctant to change. Although this educator has become a creature of habit they are aware that there are more current teaching initiatives that will best support the students they serve. They begin to converse with educators who have adopted improvement incentives and thus are inclined to believe differently. A priori educators may have held the fixed personal beliefs of an authoritative educator for many years but have shifted to the growth mindset of a tenacious educator through reflection, conversation, and collaboration. This mindset shift allows the educator to build meaningful experiences for their students into daily learning activities (Peirce, 2022) (see Figure 5).

The fourth source is experimentation. Experimentation is performing a scientific procedure to determine something (Cunningham et al., 2005, p. 180). An individual’s external permanency would not be external if it were restricted in its influence on one individual; it must be something that may affect everyone. Although these sentiments are as various as individual conditions, the method shall be such that the conclusion of every person must be the same. Furthermore, any individual, if they have adequate experience and can reason enough about it, will be led to one true conclusion (Peirce, 2022, p. 15). An educator who relies heavily on scientific investigation may request to see evidence before altering their current personal
beliefs. This type of educator may want to ensure that teaching initiatives, improvement plans, and new curriculums have supporting research before implementation. Experimental educators are not resistant to providing an inclusive education for their students with disabilities but rely heavily on research and data to support the teaching approaches, curriculums, and progress monitoring tools being implemented (see Figure 5).

The aforementioned four sources of belief fixation theory are an effective way to identify and categorize educators into differing belief categories. This categorization could help identify whether specific teachers’ personal beliefs are creating biases about their students and school system; therefore, forming barriers when working with students with disabilities that prevent an inclusive education (see Figure 5).

**Biases**

Unpacking the belief fixation theory makes it evident that educators hold personal beliefs within themselves. These beliefs are hard to alter but can be changed through de-fixation (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). In order to change, however, educators must experience a moment of genuine doubt through a lived experience where they no longer cling onto their existing personal beliefs but rather alter them to new more acceptable ones (Peirce, 2022). Until teachers can take part in professional development opportunities that focus on reflecting on current personal beliefs, experiencing genuine doubt through lived experiences, and altering their beliefs, the current personal beliefs that they possess are creating biases about students with disabilities and school systems. These biases may form barriers that prohibit students with disabilities from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve.

A bias is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair (Delgado-Rodriguez & Llorca, 2004). In this
case, many teachers form biases against students with disabilities when compared with their non-disabled peers. These biases are formed from teachers’ personal beliefs about students with disabilities and can have negative effects. These personal beliefs include believing that students with disabilities are unable to learn alongside their non-disabled peers, students with disabilities will never bridge the social, emotional, and academic gap that exists between themselves and their non-disabled peers, and students with disabilities should not be in an inclusive school setting because they will be a disruption to their non-disabled counterparts (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

In time, these personal beliefs start to transition into deficit thinking biases about their students and the school system (see Figure 6). Educators begin to place blame on their students and families and contend that their struggles in school are based on inherent deficits that they as educators should not be expected to overcome. They argue that students with disabilities have families that do not value education and lack support for their children and their educational career (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Additionally, teachers state that they should not have to exert the additional time and effort needed to accommodate for this population. Educators complain about the lack of training offered through the school district that is crucial to appropriately accommodate and differentiate lessons for their students with disabilities as well as adequately prepare them for the curriculum aligned standards and standardized assessments. Furthermore, teachers state that students with disabilities have been placed into an inclusive setting in which the proper supports and services needed for them to be successful have not been provided (Browne, 2018). Deficit thinking model as well as school system issues will be further discussed to offer an in-depth explanation as to how teachers’ personal beliefs can create deficit thinking biases about their students and school system (see Figure 6). As a result, these biases
create barriers when working with students with disabilities that do not allot them with an inclusive education. Figure 6 shows how teachers’ personal beliefs can create biases about their students and school system that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities.

**Figure 6**

*Theoretical Framework of Teacher Beliefs*

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**Deficit Thinking Model**

The deficit thinking model (see Figure 4) refers to teacher biases about their students that are created by their personal beliefs. Teachers believe that students fail in school because they and their families possess internal deficits that thwart the learning process. This could include limited education, motivation, and inadequate family support. Deficit thinking places blame on the victim rather than examining how school systems are designed to obstruct certain students from learning. The theory claims that poor schooling performance is rooted in the students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are exculpatory (Valencia, 1997, p. 1). Deficit thinking model will be utilized to describe how teachers’ biases in relation to students
with disabilities’ internal deficits can create barriers that prohibit the equitable education of these students.

The term deficit thinking was created by a small team of activist scholars in the early 1960s. These unorthodox scholars launched an assault on the existing view that declared the poor and people of color caused their own social, economic, and educational problems (Valencia, 1997). Hence, the term deficit thinking has its roots as a social construction originating from the rising tide of nonconformist thought of the 1960s. This decade was a period where deficit thinking discourse used its own socially constructed terms such as the “culturally disadvantaged child” (Black, 1966), “socializations of apathy and underachievement” (Hess, 1970), “cultural deprivation” (Edwards, 1967), and “accumulated environmental deficits” (Hess & Shaman, 1965).

According to Spillane (2015), “deficit thinking is at the core of the most pervasive and damaging ‘commonsense understandings’ about marginalized students and communities” (p. 60). Valencia (2010) further states that “deficit thinking is a tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim.’ It is a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p. xiv). Valencia did a phenomenal job of focusing on how scholars, educators, and policymakers have facilitated the deficit thinking model to explain school failure, specifically amongst low-socioeconomic status (SES) students of color such as African American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican. These aforementioned students have suffered, and continue to suffer, considerable overrepresentation among those who experience academic difficulties and school failures. These include reading below grade level and dropping out of high school. Such students are primary and easy targets of deficit thinking intellectual discourse which places blame on the students, their cultures, and their families for decreased academic success (p. xiv). Of the many conceptual
frameworks that scholars have utilized to explain school failure amongst low SES student groups, the deficit thinking paradigm has possessed the longest currency (Menchaca, 1997).

Brown (2010) demonstrated how equity audits can be used as a tool to expose disparate achievement in schools that, on the surface and to the public, appear quite similar. Equity audits contain four phases: disrupt deficit views about community, conduct initial community inquiry and shared community experiences, establish a community leadership team, and collect equity, asset-based community data for action (Green, 2016). This instrument was developed to assist educational leaders, and those who prepare them, in forming context-specific, equitable school-community solutions (Green, 2016). Brown refers to the deficit thinking model and found that several segments of the American public-school population encounter negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1994, & Venezuela, 1999, as cited in Brown, 2010, p. 2). When compared to their white, middle-class counterparts, students of color, students that are non-native English speakers, students of low socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities continuously experience lower test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander et al., 2001; Banks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Ortiz, 1997, as cited in Brown, 2010, p. 2).

Such deficit thinking biases of low expectation of the educability of discounted students regularly translates to teachers’ curricular interventions such as non-challenging seat work, ability grouping, tracking, and neglect. This discrepancy (pseudoscientific nature of deficit thinking as well as the prevalence of school failures) resides on the alluring nature of deficit thinking. Because deficit thinking depends so greatly on simplistic hypotheses and presumed deficient internal attributes of individuals to describe poor student academic outcomes, it renounces sound analysis to account for school failure (Valencia, 2015). Moreover, deficit
thinking creates barriers that disregard destructive meso level school realities, practices, and policies that include, but are not limited, to school segregation, underqualified teachers, language suppression, and curriculum differentiation (Valencia, 2015).

Furthermore, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) contend that teachers ascribed the lack of success of their students to what they considered inherent or endogenous student deficits, such as cultural inadequacies, lack of motivation, poor behavior, or failed families and communities (p. 608). The teachers seemed to believe that students could not be taught unless they came to school motivated to learn. The principal reason these teachers attributed for the students not being motivated to learn was that they felt the students’ parents did not value education. For the most part, the teachers did not believe that school was the place where students generated a desire to learn. Rather, they felt the students should come to school already motivated to learn. By blaming the students’ lack of success on the economic conditions in which they were living, the teachers could exonerate themselves of any accountability for the low academic performance of their students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

In addition, the teachers believed that the students learned to misbehave from each other and that the misbehavior spread amongst students over time. Even though the teachers partly blamed the students’ misbehavior on other students, they continuously referred the foundation of the problem back to the home in which (in the teachers’ view) the students did not learn how to behave properly. In addition, the teachers possessed a strong belief that their students walked in the school door at five years old with built-in deficits that the teachers should not be responsible to overcome. Teachers came to the false conclusion that their negative treatment of students was a consequence of the behaviors of the students (their erroneous premise). The teachers were
simply rationalizing their own beliefs and behaviors by placing blame on their students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 609).

When teachers form biases and believe that students enter school at the age of five with deficits that they cannot and should not be expected to help overcome they may place blame on the victim (the students) and focus on external factors such as family environment, value of education, and student ability levels. Teachers may place blame to justify their lack of accommodation, differentiation, and inclusion. Furthermore, they may use their power to segregate students with disabilities into a “them” out-group and include themselves and their non-disabled students into an “us” in-group. Although some teachers may think that they are doing this in an effort to surround students with disabilities with students who have similarities to themselves, they are harming their educational opportunities. As a result, barriers are created that may prohibit students with disabilities from receiving an inclusive education.

**School System Issues**

Another bias that teachers possess that create barriers when working with students with disabilities pertain to systematic issues (see Figure 4) in education as a whole. Common Core Standards and standardized testing are both systemic issues. Common Core Standards as well as standardized testing requirements play a significant role in creating teachers’ biases about school systems where they believe that their students with disabilities are unable to be successful and have an achievement gap when compared to their non-disabled peers that cannot be bridged. Educators believe that their students with disabilities are underserved with the utilization of the Common Core Standards that began to be implemented in school systems in 2010. They claim that the Standards are too rigorous and challenging for students who are identified with a disability and receiving special education services (Scruggs et al., 2013). There is no doubt that
these students who face many challenges need a greater level of support than is currently being provided for them (Bulgren et al., 2013).

Additionally, the Common Core Standards are grade specific and do not allot a fair assessment of disabled students’ ability levels since many of these students are performing at several levels below their current grade level. These grade specific Standards do not meet the needs of students with disabilities, specifically in regard to assessment, since this student population has unique learning needs. Unfortunately, there is no cognitive diversity included within the Standards. For example, most students with disabilities benefit from visual learning and engaging hand-on activities. However, based on the expectation of the Common Core Standards students with disabilities may lack the skills required to make inferences (Browne, 2018).

Although the Common Core Standards do create a barrier for disabled students, educators believe that students with disabilities are able to be successful using these Standards if sufficient changes are implemented to the Standards and adequate support is provided. For example, educators can use part of the Standards during their instructional sessions or even as a guide. They can also modify or break Standards into smaller increments and scaffold tasks into smaller sections to make them more manageable and less frustrating for their students to complete. However, teachers believe this is all done in vain. After all of these changes and modifications to the Standards and curriculum are made in an effort to accommodate for students with functional needs, they are set up for failure when they are assessed with the same grade specific Standards that caused their challenges in the first place (Browne, 2018).

In addition, teachers believe that they have not received adequate training prior to implementing the Standards. In turn, nothing is done to help them work with their students with
identifying teacher beliefs about students with disabilities through the challenges they face while trying to effectively incorporate the Standards during instruction. For many teachers involved, this lack of training creates their own individual struggles as well as forms frustration for students with disabilities who cannot comprehend the increase of rigor in their instruction and academic difficulties (Beals, 2014; Gewertz, 2015).

Gewertz (2015) and Bartlett et al. (2015) contend that educators are at a disadvantage with no real training or evidence of support to design effective lessons and instruction for their students who are utilizing the grade specific Common Core Standards. The authors who view themselves as advocates for the most vulnerable population of students spoke on the challenges that the Standards bring to lesson planning and instruction. They argue that the importance of Standards in instructional sessions are a crucial educational issue regarding the Common Core Standards. As a result, the Common Core Standards, standardized assessments, and lack of teacher training, lead teachers to believe that students with disabilities are already set up for failure. Furthermore, they believe that there is nothing they can do to overcome this and bridge the gap that already exists between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Consequently, biases about school systems are created that may form barriers that do not allow for this population of students to receive the inclusive education that they so much deserve.
Figure 7 demonstrates how historical, structural, institutional, and individual/interpersonal beliefs create systemic inequities for students with disabilities. The first level of systemic inequity is historical (Figure 7). Radd et al. (2021) states, “when we say historical we mean that the problems that we face today have their roots in centuries of human experience” (p. 11). As previously stated, students with disabilities have been historically and are still currently oppressed and segregated from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve through means of institutions, pull-out classes, and lack of access to the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Crissey, 1975; Heller, 1979; Winzer, 1998). This has and continues to be done because school systems have been created since their existence to segregate students with disabilities due to the beliefs that disabled students are not able to learn, have families that do not value education, and exhibit behaviors such as meltdowns and outbursts that will be a disruption to their non-disabled classmates (Winzer, 1993).

The next level of Figure 7 is structural inequity. Structural inequity refers to “the way our system of schooling and our entire society, for that matter, are built and organized predictably lead to the types of disparate outcomes that exist today” (Radd et al., 2021, p. 12). One example
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of structural inequity that is relative to disabled students is the way in which school systems utilize Common Core Standards to assess students with disabilities. As aforementioned, Common Core Standards are grade specific and do not allot a fair assessment of disabled students’ ability levels because many of these students are performing at several levels below their current grade level. Since this student population has unique learning needs, these grade specific Standards do not provide accommodations that ensure the success of students with disabilities, specifically regarding assessment. As a result of disabled students not receiving the appropriate accommodations needed to be successful in an inclusive setting, they are already set up for failure (Browne, 2018).

The third level of inequity is institutional inequity (Figure 7). Institutional inequity encompasses the “laws, rules, processes, and organizations we use to engage in schooling and other aspects of our lives that all work to continue historical and current patterns of inequity” (Radd et al., 2021, p. 12). Deficit thinking is an institutional inequity that works to continue historical and current patterns of inequity in schools today. As earlier stated by Spillane (2015), “deficit thinking is at the core of the most pervasive and damaging ‘commonsense understandings’ about marginalized students and communities” (p. 60). Valencia (2010) also contends that “deficit thinking is a tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim.’ It is a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p. xiv). Valencia focused his work on how students of color have suffered, and continue to suffer, vast overrepresentation among those who experience academic difficulties and school failures such as reading below grade level, dropping out of high school, and qualifying for special education services. Such students are primary and easy targets of deficit thinking intellectual discourse. Of the many conceptual frameworks that scholars have used to explain school failure amongst low SES student groups, the deficit
thinking paradigm has possessed the longest currency in institutional inequity (Menchaca, 1997).

The fourth and final level of inequity is individual/interpersonal inequity (Figure 7). This type of inequity involves “overt, intentional acts of individual meanness, exclusion, and unfair treatment” (Radd et al., 2021, p. 13) as well as unconscious biases that “contribute to negative judgment, exclusion, and discrimination” (Radd et al., 2021, p. 14). For thousands of years before the turn of the 18th century people with disabilities were faced with overt, intentional acts of unfair treatment (Radd et al., 2021). As previously stated, society displayed disablism and supported the unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities (Kumari-Campbell, 2009). Furthermore, society judged families with children with functional needs. In turn, parents hid their children with disabilities from public view (Dybwad, 1990). Additionally, people with disabilities were viewed as less than human and qualitatively different from the rest of society (Carey, 2009; Trent, 1994; Winzer, 1998). Because society believed that disability was inhuman and deviant, people with disabilities were moved from the public eye to institutions and hospitals (Carey, 2009; Winzer, 1998).

In the late 1800s-mid 1950s, society made a shift from exhibiting disablism to ableism (Dolmage, 2020). Eugenics emerged as a philosophy to resolve the problem of individuals with disabilities (Blacker, 1947). As aforementioned, some believed that if they could control the reproduction of people with disabilities they could eliminate disability altogether. Although not as overt as disablism, these unconscious ablism biases contributed to negative judgment, exclusion, and discrimination of disabled individuals (Radd et al., 2021).

In summary, historical oppressions formed structural and institutional inequities that have and continue to oppress students with disabilities. As previously mentioned, these include but are
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not limited to common core standards, standardized assessments, and deficit thinking that places blame on the students rather than exploring systematic inequities. As a result, structural and institutional inequities percolate into the individual/interpersonal beliefs of its educators (Figure 7), and teachers begin to believe that students with disabilities are not able to learn and progress (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001), should not be given access to opportunities to further their social, emotional, and academic growth (Leiter, 2004), and are not motivated to learn because their parents do not value education (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). These personal beliefs form deficit thinking biases about their students and school system that create barriers when working with students with disabilities. As a result, disabled students are still not being provided with the accommodations needed to be successful. Thus, resulting in this student population not receiving the inclusive education they deserve.

Summary

This chapter outlined the history of special education in the United States, special education legal cases and policies, belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system issues that guide the purpose of this study as well as aid focus on improvement as a learning process. Together, these theories build a framework that aims to investigate teachers' personal beliefs that can create biases about their students and school system. In doing so, an explanation as to why barriers may be created when working with students with IEPs can be revealed. Additionally, these theories assist in viewing and learning from teachers who are having a challenging time allocating an inclusive education for all students, no matter their abilities. Furthermore, the aforementioned theories permit the analysis of teachers’ stated beliefs or the reasons that they provide for using those practices. Consequently, a greater understanding of the sources of teacher deficit thinking and why they sometimes choose to blame students with
disabilities’ failures on external family factors will be revealed. This newfound understanding will aid in designing more effective ways to foster critical self-reflection that can break barriers and support the adoption of effective strategies to successfully provide the educational opportunities that students with disabilities deserve.
Chapter Three

Methodology

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
— (Baldwin, 1962, p. 1)

All students, no matter their abilities deserve an inclusive education. Because students with IEPs require more support, adaptations, and differentiation than most students, the work and expectations of an educator are increased when providing these accommodations. Teachers’ personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school systems must be assessed to identify any components that create barriers when working with students with functional needs (Lindsay, 2007); therefore, ensuring an inclusive education for students with disabilities. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the personal beliefs Pre-K-12 teachers at Sunnyside School District possess that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities. This chapter will proceed to describe the research purpose, questions, hypotheses, design, target population, sampling method and size, instrumentation, analysis methods, validity, and limitations of the research purpose.

Research, Purpose, and Questions

The identification of teachers’ beliefs and biases when serving students with disabilities can be strong indicators of whether barriers are being created when working with disabled students that result in these students not receiving the inclusive education they deserve. Consequently, the purpose of this descriptive study is to investigate the beliefs Pre-K-12 teachers have when working with students with disabilities in the Sunnyside School District that are specific to teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school system. Once teacher beliefs and biases are revealed, school leaders can provide professional development opportunities that focus on allotting teachers with the skills and tools needed to
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contribute to more positive beliefs about working with students with disabilities and providing their disabled students with an inclusive education. Pointedly, the following questions will direct this study.

1. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their students?
2. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system?

Research Design

Research methods are specific procedures for collecting and analyzing data (Scribbr, 2023). This particular study utilized a quantitative descriptive research method. The research design for this study was pertinent because it gave the researcher the opportunity to identify the beliefs and biases held by teachers at Sunnyside School District, a rural district located in Northeast US, that could create barriers when working with disabled students. For the intent of identifying the beliefs and biases that may exist about working with students with disabilities, the Multidimensional Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (MATIES) Survey was utilized to help frame research by measuring teachers’ personal beliefs that may create deficit thinking biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities.

On March 28, 2023, an email was sent from the researcher to all district teachers from the selected school district inviting them to participate in their study in an effort to identify teacher beliefs and biases that could create barriers when working with students with disabilities at Sunnyside School District. A link in the teacher email opened the MATIES Survey (Appendix A). A deadline of April 7, 2023, was stated in the email. Follow-up email reminders were sent by the researcher four days prior to the deadline and two days prior to the deadline. Once all
participants’ surveys were submitted on April 7, 2023, the researcher input data into
Google Sheets for analysis.

**Data Collection Procedures**

An email was sent from the researcher to all district teachers from the selected school
district inviting them to participate in their study in an effort to identify teachers’ personal beliefs
that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when
working with students with disabilities. The opportunity for consent was provided at the point of
participation. The participants learned about the conditions of their participation and the
procedures to withdraw from the study at any point in the email that was sent by the researcher.
A link in the teacher email opened the MATIES Survey through Google Forms. A deadline was
stated in the email. Follow-up email reminders were sent by the researcher 4 days prior to the
deadline and 2 days prior to the deadline. All responses to the survey were anonymous so that the
participants’ rights and confidentiality were respected throughout the study. Once all
participants’ surveys were submitted, the researcher input data into Google Sheets for analysis.
Responses to the survey were deleted once data were analyzed.

**Sampling Method and Sample Size**

A total population sampling was used for this study. In this specific study, all 104
teachers (special education, general education, specials teachers) of all grade levels (Pre-K-12) at
the Sunnyside School District were given the opportunity to be in the sample because they
represented opinions on teachers’ beliefs when working with students with disabilities. Thirty-
three of the 104 teachers chose to participate.
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Instrumentation

The MATIES Survey was utilized for this study. Marian Mahat developed the MATIES survey in 2008 in order to successfully measure affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes within the realm of physical, social, and curricular inclusive educational practices. Study analyses of MATIES show that it met standards for internal reliability, content validity, construct validity, criterion validity, and convergent validity which yields evidence to warrant the use of this instrument for the intention of measuring teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education (Mahat, 2008). The MATIES used a Likert-type scale that allowed for six ratings in consideration of teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school systems that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities - Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of 22 questions. Questions 19-22 were demographic in nature and did not identify beliefs and biases that could create barriers when working with disabled students. The remaining questions on the teacher survey were aligned with research questions one and two which were rooted in belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system barriers. These survey questions were asked to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities. Specifically, questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 17 were aligned with the deficit thinking model and helped to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that create deficit thinking biases about their students (research question one). Questions 1, 5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 18 were aligned with systematic issues and aided in identifying teachers’ personal beliefs that can form biases about the school system (research question two).
Data Analysis Methods

The study conducted was a descriptive research study. Descriptive research is utilized to describe the characteristics of a population. It collects data that are used to answer a wide range of what, when, and how questions concerning a specific population or group. Descriptive research does not answer questions about why a certain phenomenon takes place or what the causes are. However, data from descriptive studies can be utilized to investigate relationships (correlations) between variables. Study participants are questioned in a natural setting (e.g., educational setting), and study data can be used to recognize the frequency of particular problems as well as identify the need for new or supplemental services to address these problems. Descriptive research may identify areas that need additional research as well as relationships between variables that require future study and is frequently known as "hypothesis generating research" (Child Care and Early Education Research Connections, 2023).

The instrumentation used for this descriptive study was the MATIES Survey. Data from the survey were analyzed to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with disabilities. Google Sheets was utilized to analyze the data. A descriptive analysis of each of the survey questions will be provided and will be aligned to the three components of the study’s theoretical framework: belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system barriers. Additionally, the data will be disaggregated by reviewing the results of the survey questions and then unpacking each question and presenting the results as it applies to various groups (grades Pre-K-5, 6-8, and 9-12).
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Summary

This chapter proposed the outline for this quantitative study. Because teachers play such a key role in determining whether a student with a disability receives an inclusive education, it is imperative to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about their students and school system that can form barriers when working with students with functional needs. Consequently, the intent of this study's methodology was to identify teacher beliefs and biases that create barriers when working with students with disabilities. The purpose of identifying the impact of such factors was to decide what measures school leaders can focus on that will provide teachers with the skills and tools needed to contribute to more positive beliefs about working with disabled students, thus resulting in students with disabilities receiving an inclusive education.
Chapter Four

Results

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

— (Hurston, 1996, p. 143)

The current study investigated the personal beliefs that pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade (Pre-K-12) teachers at the Sunnyside School District have about working with students with disabilities that may form barriers when working with disabled students. While investigating these personal beliefs, there were two specific variables that were explored. These variables aligned to research questions one and two and were teachers’ personal beliefs that create biases about their students and teachers’ personal beliefs that create biases about the school system.

Demographics

One hundred and four teachers were asked to participate in the current investigation by completing a survey. Out of 104 teachers, 33 teachers chose to participate. Figure 8 demonstrates the percentage of participants that work in an elementary school, middle school, and high school setting.
Note. Out of the 33 teachers that responded, 15 of the teachers work in the elementary school building serving students in grades pre-kindergarten through five (45.5%), seven of the teachers work in the middle school building serving students in grades six through eight (21.2%), and 11 teachers work in the high school building serving students in grades nine through 12 (33.3%).

The participants’ years of experience teaching in professional education range from two to 34 years. Furthermore, the participants’ amount of special education experience varies and ranges from no experience to obtaining a master’s degree in special education. Out of the three buildings, three teachers in the elementary school obtained a bachelor's degree in special education, one teacher in the middle school obtained a master’s degree in special education, and one teacher in the high school obtained a bachelor’s degree in special education.

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their students?
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2. What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system?

Analysis

Figures 9 and 10 are charts that identify biased and non-biased responses to the MATIES survey. They are aligned with the aforementioned two research questions. The highlighted survey questions (2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 1, 8, and 14) are questions where at least 15% of the participants had biased responses and displayed bias. Out of the 33 teachers who participated in the MATIES Survey, 25 teachers had at least one biased response to the survey questions, while eight teachers did not respond in a biased way to any of the questions. Following the charts is an in-depth analysis of these particular questions that identifies clusters by building levels and perceived levels of administrative support that are crucial to this study.
**MATIES Survey Results for Research Question One**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Responses Related to Research Question One: What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their students?</th>
<th>Biased Responses</th>
<th>Non-Biased Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. I believe that students with a disability should be taught in special education schools.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I believe that inclusion facilitates socially appropriate behavior among all students.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I believe that any student can learn in the regular curriculum of the school if the curriculum is adapted to meet their individual needs.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I get frustrated when I have difficulty communicating with students with a disability.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I get irritated when I am unable to understand students with a disability.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I am uncomfortable including students with a disability in a regular classroom with other students without a disability.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I am disconcerted that students with a disability are included in the regular classroom, regardless of the severity of the disability.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I am willing to encourage students with a disability to participate in all social activities in the regular classroom.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I am willing to adapt my communication techniques to ensure that all students with an emotional and behavioral disorder can be successfully included in the regular classroom.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 10

**MATIES Survey Results for Research Question Two**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Responses Related to Research Question Two: What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system?</th>
<th>Biased Responses</th>
<th>Non-Biased Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I believe that students with a disability should be segregated because it is too expensive to modify the physical environment of the school.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I believe that students with a disability should be in special education schools so that they do not experience rejection in the regular school.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I get upset when students with a disability cannot keep up with the day-to-day curriculum in my classroom.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I get frustrated when I have to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I am willing to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students regardless of their disability.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I am willing to physically include students with a severe disability in the regular classroom with the necessary support.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I am willing to modify the physical environment to include students with a disability in the regular classroom.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I am willing to adapt the assessment of individual students in order for the inclusive education to take place.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When analyzing the data from Figures 9 and 10 it is apparent that there were more biased responses reported in regard to research question one (What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

students?) than research question two (What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system?). There were 51 biased responses that aligned to research question one and 30 biased responses that aligned with research question two.

**Figure 11**

*MATIES Data Analysis for Research Question One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Number of Biased Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Years of Educational Experience</th>
<th>Building with Most Biased Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>19, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>28, 25, 15</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8, 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34, 23, 14, 21</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>33, 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>24, 21, 14, 12, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>13, 17, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>15, 25, 33, 16, 18, 19</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14, 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>17, 13</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15, 22 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25, 17</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18, 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 11 shows the MATIES Survey questions that received clusters of biased responses to research question one. This information is disaggregated by building, number of biased responses, percentage of biased responses, respondents’ years of educational experience, and the building that had the most biased responses per survey question. One of the most interesting findings when analyzing the data pertaining to the questions about student deficit thinking was that the responses that showed clusters of bias were not specific to one area: social, emotional, or academic growth. Rather, they focused on all three. Additionally, although on a percentage basis, the smallest response size was middle school teachers (21.2%), this group also showed the largest number of biased responses to the above questions. Finally, all of the teachers who responded in a substantially biased way were veteran teachers with an average of 20 years of educational experience. Therefore, the teachers who showed clusters of biased responses about working with students with disabilities have been teaching this population of students for an average of 20 years.

Figure 12 shows the MATIES Survey questions that received a substantial amount of biased responses to research question two.
IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 12

*MATIES Data Analysis for Research Question Two*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Number of Biased Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Years of Educational Experience</th>
<th>Building with Most Biased Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>28, 25, 17</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>33, 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25, 17</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22, 33, 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8, 15</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to Figure 11, information in Figure 12 is disaggregated by building, number of biased responses, percentage of biased responses, respondents’ years of educational experience, and the building that had the most biased responses per survey question. An interesting finding when analyzing this data is that all of the systems questions that showed clusters of biased responses pertained to curriculum and academic progress. This was particularly interesting because all other MATIES Survey questions that were aligned to research question two were focused on the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. This shows that biases when specific to the school system lie more in curriculum and the academic success of students with disabilities rather than the acceptance of including students with disabilities into the classrooms. Furthermore, although on a percentage basis, the smallest response size was middle school teachers (21.2%), the participants in this building showed the largest number of biased responses
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to the above questions. Results of these findings demonstrate the need for administrators to find and implement meaningful professional development opportunities for middle school teachers that focus on deficit thinking beliefs about students with disabilities, as well as focus on beliefs regarding their school system. A more in-depth discussion on this topic will take place in Chapter Five. Finally, similar to the survey questions that aligned with research question one, all of the teachers who had a substantial amount of biased responses were veteran teachers with an average of 22 years of educational experience. Data from the current investigation is alarming considering that the teachers who show clusters of biased responses about working with their students with disabilities have been teaching this population of students for an average of 22 years. Figure 13 demonstrates the amount of administrative support in the area of inclusive educational practices that participants felt that they received throughout their employment as educators.

Figure 13

MATIES Survey Responses-Level of Overall Support from Administrators-All Buildings

![Pie chart showing levels of support from administrators](image-url)
Note. Of the total number of respondents to the MATIES Survey (33), 21.2% of participants reported minimal support from administration, 39.4% of respondents reported average support from administration, 27.3% of the respondents reported fair support from administration, and 12.1% of respondents reported exceptional support from administration.

Administrative support is crucial to the success of a school district’s inclusive education; therefore, Question 22 of the MATIES Survey asked participants to identify the level of overall support they feel their administrators provide in an effort for inclusive education to be effective. Unfortunately, only 12.1% of participants felt that they were receiving exceptional support from administration; analyzing all of the responses to the MATIES Survey (33) clarifies that the smallest percentage of respondents feel that they are receiving exceptional administrative support. Furthermore, Figure 14 shows the level of overall support from administration that teachers who responded to the survey in a substantially biased way feel they are receiving from administrators.
Figure 14

Level of Overall Support from Administration-Teachers Who Responded to the MATIES Survey in a Substantially Biased Way

Note. Of the 25 teachers who responded in a substantially biased way to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 14 of the MATIES Survey, 28% believe they are receiving minimal support from administration, 36% believe they are receiving average support from administration, 24% believe they are receiving fair support from administration, and 12% believe that they are receiving exceptional support from administration.

The data show that there are clusters of biased responses by individuals who perceive minimal or average support from administration. Figure 15 shows the number of respondents in each building who showed clusters of biased responses when responding to survey questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 14 in relation to the overall level of support that they feel that they are receiving from administration.
The data reveal that there is a connection between teachers whose responses showed clusters of biased responses and the level of overall support that they feel they are receiving from their administrators. Although on a percentage basis, the smallest response size was middle school teachers (21.2%), again, middle school teachers feel that they are receiving the smallest amount of support from their administrative team; 43% of middle school teachers reported receiving minimal support. When compared to elementary and high school, 13% of elementary teachers reported receiving minimal support, and 18% of high school teachers reported receiving minimal support. The aforementioned findings represent a need for professional development opportunities for Sunnyside School District’s middle school administration. Professional development can focus on building relationships with teachers as well as the successful inclusion of students with disabilities pertaining to the areas of social, emotional, and academic growth. A more in-depth discussion of this topic will also take place in Chapter Five.

Chapter Summary

Descriptive statistics were computed regarding participants, and frequency of participation was broken up by the participants’ current place of employment: elementary,
middle, or high school. Relationships between teachers’ personal beliefs that may form biases about their students and teachers’ personal beliefs that may create biases about the school system were reported. The most substantial findings were that the data pertaining to student deficit thinking that showed clusters of bias were not specific to one area (social, emotional, or academic growth) but focused on all three. In addition, all of the systems questions that showed clusters of biased responses were specific to curriculum and academic progress rather than the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Also, although on a percentage basis, the smallest response size was middle school teachers (21.2%), middle school teachers showed the largest number of biased responses to the survey questions that were aligned with both research questions 1 and 2. Finally, all of the teachers who responded in a substantially biased way to the MATIES Survey questions were veteran teachers with an average of 21 years of educational experience.

In reviewing the MATIES Survey data, some of the teachers who responded in substantially biased ways stand out. In particular, there was a teacher in the middle school who has 17 years of educational experience and responded to 10 of the 18 survey questions (questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 17) in a biased manner. The areas of bias included questions concerning all areas of success: social, emotional, and academic progress and were aligned with both research questions 1 (student deficit thinking) and 2 (school system issues). Specifically, the social and emotional survey questions focused on communicating, including, adapting for, and differentiating for students with disabilities. Academic questions focused on adjusting the curriculum and physical space so disabled students can be academically successful in the classroom. This particular teacher’s responses reveal their personal beliefs that students with disabilities cannot be socially, emotionally, or academically successful in a school environment.
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This teacher’s personal beliefs are likely to create biases about their students with disabilities and the school system that form barriers when working with disabled students. Chapter Five will provide suggestions specific to pre-service education, professional development opportunities, inclusive curricula, and training that may have a positive impact on educators’ personal beliefs. The hope is that teachers, like the one previously mentioned, that have biases towards students with disabilities can gain the skills and tools needed to provide an inclusive education to all disabled students.
“Every story I write adds to me a little, changes me a little, forces me to reexamine an attitude or belief, causes me to research and learn, helps me to understand people and grow.”
― (Butler, 2023, p. 1)

This study was conducted in an effort to identify the beliefs of Pre-K-12 teachers at the Sunnyside School District regarding working with students with disabilities. Teacher beliefs can form biases about their students and the school system that may create barriers when working with disabled students. The researcher wanted to better understand if the teachers at Sunnyside School District hold personal beliefs about students with disabilities that are interfering with disabled students receiving the inclusive education they deserve. In order to uncover this information, the MATIES Survey in Appendix A was administered in the winter of 2023 to all teachers (Pre-K-12) at Sunnyside. This chapter affords a summary of the study’s major findings and limitations as well as provides recommendations for further investigation. It also connects the researcher’s findings to a conceptual framework that encompasses the deficit thinking model, school system issues, and belief fixation theory. This conceptual framework is significant to the study because it sets the stage for the descriptive quantitative design of the research and shows how teachers’ personal beliefs can create biases about their students and school system that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities.

Summary of Findings

Research Question One

Research question one asked: What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are rooted in perceived deficiencies about their students?
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Analyzing the data from the MATIES Survey that were aligned with research question one clarified that the MATIES questions that showed clusters of bias were concentric with the deficit thinking model. These questions were not specific to one area: social, emotional, or academic growth. Rather, they focused on all three. Some teachers at Sunnyside reported that they believe students with a disability should be taught in special education schools and that inclusion does not facilitate socially appropriate behavior among all students. Additionally, some educators do not believe that all students can learn from the regular curriculum of the school even if the curriculum is adapted to meet the individual needs of students. Furthermore, some teachers stated that they get frustrated when they have difficulty communicating with their students with a disability and are disconcerted that disabled students are included in the regular classroom, regardless of their severity of needs.

These clusters of biased responses support the deficit thinking model. The theory claims that poor schooling performance is rooted in the students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are exculpatory (Valencia, 1997, p. 1). According to Spillane (2015), “deficit thinking is at the core of the most pervasive and damaging ‘commonsense understandings’ about marginalized students and communities” (p. 60). Valencia (2010) further states that “deficit thinking is a tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim’ [and] is a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p. xiv). Teacher deficit thinking places blame on the victim in all three areas of growth and claims that poor schooling performance (academics) is rooted in the students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits (social and emotional) rather than reflecting on what they as teachers can do to accommodate and differentiate for their disabled students (Valencia, 1997). Furthermore, teacher deficit thinking
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ascribes the lack of success of students with disabilities to what is considered inherent or endogenous student deficits, such as cultural inadequacies, lack of motivation, poor behavior, or failed families and communities (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 608). The data from the MATIES Survey demonstrates that some teachers at Sunnyside believe that students cannot be taught unless they come to school motivated to learn. Furthermore, some educators do not believe that school is the place where students generate a desire to learn; they believe that students should come to school already motivated to learn. By blaming the students for their lack of success these teachers can exonerate themselves of any accountability for the low academic performance of their students with disabilities (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

In addition, the data from the MATIES Survey suggest that some teachers at Sunnyside believe that students with disabilities learn to misbehave from one another; therefore, causing the misbehavior to spread among students over time (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). The data also indicates that some teachers at Sunnyside possess a strong belief that their students walk in the school door at five years old with built-in deficits that educators should not be responsible to overcome (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). These teachers falsely conclude that their negative treatment of students is a consequence of the behaviors of the students (their erroneous premise). In reality, the teachers are simply rationalizing their own beliefs and behaviors by placing blame on their students with disabilities (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

Based on deficit thinking model and the suggested data from the MATIES Survey, implications from this study suggest that it is imperative for pre-service teachers to examine their beliefs before they become practicing educators. According to Richardson (1996), personal beliefs are well established by the time a student begins college and are formed by personal experience, schooling and instruction, and formal knowledge. In relation to
education, Richardson’s theory would mean that pre-service teachers’ belief systems are already formed by the time they begin their post-secondary education. Beliefs and expectations direct and navigate how teachers respond toward varying students and can lend to differential expectations and treatment based on race and ethnicity, social class, gender differences, and ability; therefore, it is imperative for pre-service teachers to be surrounded by professors and other educational professionals during their teacher preparation experience that hold equitable and open-minded beliefs. Influence from open-minded individuals can increase the chances for personal reflection.

Furthermore, professors should provide pre-service teachers with continuous opportunities that challenge and alter former beliefs and biases that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities. Challenging the beliefs of pre-service teachers can assist them in possessing equitable qualities when they become classroom teachers (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Opportunities could include guest speakers, field work, reflection journals, research projects, presentations, case studies, experiential situations, storytelling, and class discussion. Reflecting on beliefs while in post-secondary school may cause pre-service teachers to be less inclined to possess deficit thinking beliefs about disabled students when they become practicing educators; therefore, allowing students with disabilities the chance for an inclusive education.

**Research Question Two**

Research question two asked: What biases do educators possess about working with students with disabilities that are related to their views of the school system? All of the school system questions that showed clusters of biased responses were specific to curriculum and academic progress. For example, some teachers at Sunnyside stated that they do not believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their
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abilities. Additionally, some educators reported that they get upset when a student with a disability cannot keep up with the day-to-day curriculum in their classrooms. Some teachers also noted that they are not willing to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of students regardless of whether or not they have a disability.

These findings align with issues at a systematic level. School system issues can play a key role in teachers possessing personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school systems that form barriers when working with students with disabilities. These educational barriers can deter disabled students from receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. The data from the MATIES Survey suggest that some teachers at Sunnyside believe that learning standards that are aligned to the curriculum as well as standardized assessments put their students with functional needs at a disadvantage; the standards are grade-level based and students with disabilities are already performing below grade level (Browne, 2018). Although teachers are given the opportunity to differentiate and accommodate for disabled students during their learning time, the students are expected to take standardized assessments at their current grade level. The data from the MATIES Survey suggest that standards that are aligned to the curriculum and standardized testing forms frustration for some teachers; as a result, these teachers believe that their students with IEPs are already set up for failure and will never be able to bridge the gap between themselves and their non-disabled peers (Browne, 2018). As mentioned in Chapter Two, historical oppressions assisted in creating structural and institutional inequities that oppress students with disabilities (Radd et al., 2021). These inequities include, but are not limited to, teaching standards and standardized assessments. As a result, structural and institutional inequities percolate into the individual and interpersonal beliefs of some educators (Radd et al., 2021). These teachers begin to believe that students with disabilities are not able to
learn and progress (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Furthermore, some educators believe that disabled students should not be given access to opportunities to further their social, emotional, and academic growth (Leiter, 2004). These educators’ personal beliefs form biases about school systems that create barriers when working with students with disabilities. School system issues that were revealed through the MATIES Survey data suggest that these structural and institutional inequities have filtered into the personal beliefs of some of Sunnyside’s teachers and have created school system biases that cause barriers when working with the district’s students with disabilities. Consequently, disabled students at Sunnyside are not being provided with the accommodations needed to be successful. Therefore, all students, especially students with disabilities, are not receiving the inclusive education they deserve.

Along with teaching standards and standardized assessments, appropriate teacher training opportunities are another issue at a systematic level. Students with disabilities could benefit during instructional time by having the learning standards broken into smaller sections and by completing hands-on learning activities that are aligned to standards. However, some teachers do not feel fully comfortable incorporating differentiated activities into their classrooms because they believe that they have been inadequately trained (Browne, 2018). Consequently, these teachers are uncomfortable spending time on differentiating lessons and creating hands-on learning experiences because they are not certain that they are doing it correctly (Browne, 2018). The data from the MATIES Survey suggest that some teachers at Sunnyside do not want to spend the time needed to accommodate their students with functional needs. This could be due to the fact that they feel uncomfortable making these accommodations because they do not feel appropriately trained to do so. As a result, some teachers at Sunnyside are not providing all
disabled students with the engaging, hands-on, multi-sensory learning experiences that are crucial for success in an inclusive educational setting (Browne, 2018).

Based on Sunnyside’s school system issues that were suggested from the data of the MATIES Survey it is crucial for the district’s administrative team to research and purchase inclusive curricula that is universal and intended to improve the experience, skills, and attainment of all students, including those with disabilities (Wiley University Services, 2023, p. 1). This curriculum should also guarantee that the principles of inclusivity are embedded within all aspects of the academic cycle: social, emotional, and academic growth by including stories about students with various disabilities, suggestions on how to differentiate lessons in order to ensure the success of students with numerous needs, activities that give opportunities for student choice and voice, activities that promote building meaningful relationships among students with and without disabilities, and projects that allow students to incorporate their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences into their education. Furthermore, while implementing this inclusive curriculum, teachers’ primary objective should be to educate students who have disabilities in the regular classroom and still meet their individual needs while learning alongside their non-disabled peers (Wiley University Services, 2023, p. 1).

Additionally, all-inclusive curricula are not the same. Therefore, it is imperative for the district to hire a curriculum director who will collaborate with administrators as well as research curriculum that has been successfully implemented into schools that are similar in demographics to Sunnyside, specifically in relation to their population of students with disabilities. In addition, strong collaboration between schools, families, and the community can create an environment that promotes students’ emotional well-being and academic skills. For this reason, choosing the best inclusive curriculum for Sunnyside’s students should be a holistic process that includes the
voices of all constituents: teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, community members, etc. Building relationships at this magnitude will provide multiple voices and backgrounds that will help ensure a curriculum decision that will focus on the social, emotional, and academic success of all students at Sunnyside.

Before purchasing the curriculum administrators should select general education teachers from each grade-level that incorporate successful inclusive practices into their classrooms as well special education teachers to visit local school districts who are utilizing the inclusive curriculum. This will give educators the opportunity to see curriculum being implemented with students in real time. After their observation, Sunnyside’s teachers should meet with the educators who are currently using the inclusive curriculum in order to discuss student results and strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. Once the chosen curriculum is purchased the same teachers who observed in neighboring school districts should pilot the curriculum for one year in each grade level. This will allow teachers and administrators to see if the curriculum is truly beneficial to their students before implementing it district-wide. These chosen teachers and administrators should meet on a bi-weekly basis in order to discuss if they are seeing successful results with their students.

Furthermore, chosen teachers at Sunnyside should be provided with ongoing training opportunities from the company in which the curriculum was purchased before and during its implementation. They should be given the chance to learn how to correctly implement the curriculum in their classrooms as well as ask questions throughout the process. Teachers can participate in this ongoing professional development as a part of Act 48, which is a Pennsylvania stipulation that “requires all Pennsylvania educators holding Pennsylvania public school certifications (including Instructional I and II, Educational Specialist I and II, and
Administrative, Supervisory, Letters of Eligibility, and all vocational certificates) to participate in ongoing professional education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). In addition, teachers should be able to meet with a trainer virtually each month to receive ongoing training. This could be a 30-minute virtual training opportunity that provides the teachers with new ways to utilize the curriculum and supplemental materials so the lessons continue to be engaging for Sunnyside’s students. Additionally, the continuous opportunities for teachers to acquire more knowledge, skill, and ideas to implement into their classrooms push educators to continue to learn and are motivational tools that help teachers to remain excited about implementing this inclusive curriculum into their classrooms. As a result, students with disabilities will receive an inclusive education and teachers will feel adequately trained in order to provide disabled students with the inclusive educational experience they deserve.

Programs such as Multi-Tier Support Systems (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should be incorporated into the district to help best support and ensure the inclusive education for students with disabilities. By implementing these programs, students with disabilities will be provided with increased instructional time, interventions, and improved educational outcomes as well as system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and evidence-based practices that inscribe barriers to student learning and discipline. Additionally, disabled students will be given opportunities to receive high quality research-based instruction in their general education setting, be continuously progress-monitored and screened for academic and behavioral problems, as well as receive multiple levels of instruction based on student need. Furthermore, Sunnyside’s students with disabilities will be provided with several means of representation to acquire, process, and integrate information and knowledge, be allotted with a wide range of teaching strategies appropriate to their needs as well as a variety of options.
to choose from in order to express what they already know, and be given multiple means of engagement that allow a wide range of choice that supports and increases student motivation. By incorporating these programs into Sunnyside, the district’s disabled students will be provided with the supports needed to be successful in an inclusive learning environment.

**Findings of Concern**

When analyzing the data from the MATIES Survey there were some findings that were concerning. First, although on a percentage basis, the smallest response size was middle school teachers (21.2%), middle school teachers demonstrated the largest number of biased responses to the survey questions that were aligned with both research questions one and two. The data also revealed that there is a connection between teachers whose responses showed clusters of biased responses and the level of overall administrative support. Although on a percentage basis the smallest response size was middle school teachers, again, middle school teachers at Sunnyside believe that they are receiving the smallest amount of support from their administrative team (43% reported receiving minimal support). Based on the aforementioned findings it is imperative for administrators at the Sunnyside School District to find and implement meaningful professional development opportunities for its middle school teachers. This professional development should focus on deficit thinking beliefs about students with disabilities as well as beliefs about their school system. Additionally, professional development opportunities for Sunnyside School District’s middle school administrators should be implemented. This professional development should focus on beliefs about building relationships with teachers and the successful inclusion of students with disabilities pertaining to the areas of social, emotional, and academic growth. A more in-depth description of these professional development opportunities is discussed below.
Another concerning finding is that all of the teachers who responded in a substantially biased way to the MATIES Survey questions that aligned with both research questions one and two were veteran teachers with an average of 20-22 years of educational experience. This finding was particularly alarming because the teachers who showed clusters of biased responses regarding working with their students with disabilities have been teaching this population of students for an average of 21 years. Teachers are the instrumental and influential leaders of their classrooms; therefore, they create the learning environment and set the tone for how non-disabled students will treat their disabled peers. Veteran teachers at Sunnyside who hold deficit thinking beliefs about their students with disabilities will create a classroom climate and culture that is not inclusive and accepting of disabled students. Consequently, students without disabilities will be influenced by their teachers’ deficit thinking beliefs and will begin to blame students with disabilities for their social, emotional, and academic struggles. Furthermore, students with disabilities may be excluded from school activities, and potentially bullied. Mistreatment of peers from non-disabled students could carry into the future when non-disabled students become working professionals themselves; the deficit-thinking beliefs that were instilled in them at a young age could develop into adulthood leading to further exclusion and inequitable treatment of individuals with disabilities.

The above finding about some of the veteran teachers at Sunnyside School District aligns with belief fixation theory and supports that personal beliefs are fixed, guide our desires, and shape our actions. In addition, personal beliefs are also stubborn and resistant to change and are so strong that they tend to persist despite evidence to the contrary (Peirce, 2022). Furthermore, teachers’ attitudes represent a network of various personal beliefs that are utilized to predict behavior. These personal beliefs also arbitrate knowledge and action (behaviors/skills).
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(Bandura, 1982, as cited in Pohan & Aguilar, 2001, p. 160) and impact teachers’ perceptions and judgments; therefore, influencing how teachers in the classroom behave towards students with disabilities (Pajares, 1992). If teachers’ personal beliefs do not support the inclusion of students with disabilities then biases will be created that form barriers when working with disabled students; as a result, students with disabilities are prevented from receiving an inclusive education.

Unpacking belief fixation theory as well as the data from the MATIES Survey suggest that some veteran educators at Sunnyside hold personal beliefs that are creating biases about their students and school system that form barriers when working with disabled students. These beliefs are hard to alter but can be changed through de-fixation (Dascal & Dascal, 2013). In order to change; however, these educators must experience a moment of genuine doubt through a lived experience where they no longer cling onto their existing personal beliefs, but rather alter their beliefs to become more acceptable (Peirce, 2022).

The aforementioned findings of concern which include middle school teachers, middle school administration, and veteran teachers can be addressed through ongoing professional development opportunities that focus on teacher and administrative beliefs. Fishman et al. (2003) argues that professional development should fundamentally focus on igniting changes in knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers that lead to the accession of new skills, new concepts, and new processes related to teaching. They state that a central objective of professional development should be to support changes in teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, because these components of teacher cognition have displayed a substantial correlation to teachers’ classroom practices.
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In addition, Fishman et al. (2003) also contend that because teacher beliefs have a strong positive correlation to instructional practice a crucial goal of professional development should be to impact teacher beliefs. Similarly, Luft and Roehrig (2007) discovered that teacher beliefs are pliable and can change or be modified by professional development. For these reasons, Sunnyside’s middle school administrators, teachers, and veteran teachers should take part in professional development opportunities that focus on reflecting on current personal beliefs, experiencing genuine doubt through lived experiences, and altering their beliefs. Professional development opportunities at Sunnyside can have similar components as pre-service teaching experiences: guest speakers, reflection journals, presentations, case studies, experiential situations, storytelling, and open forum discussions. As a result, administrators’ and teachers’ personal beliefs should no longer create biases about students with disabilities that may form barriers that prohibit disabled students from receiving an inclusive education.

Limitations

There are many limitations to this investigation. First, this study’s findings and recommendations cannot be generalized to all school districts. Rather, they are limited to only districts with similar demographics to Sunnyside’s. Additionally, the notion of exploring a complex phenomenon like bias via a purely quantitative instrument is a limitation. Although this descriptive quantitative instrument focused on what/when/how questions, it did not consider why teachers’ personal beliefs are creating biases about their students and school system that can create barriers when working with students with disabilities.

Another limitation is that the researcher in the current study is a teacher, parent, and community member in the district being investigated. As a result, answers from the teacher survey may not represent teachers’ true feelings about working with students with disabilities.
due to feeling the need to answer the questions in a way that does not present a certain belief and/or bias that creates barriers when working with disabled students. This is known as social desirability. Social desirability occurs when respondents provide answers on topics that lend to portraying themselves in a positive light. Consequently, the validity of the results is a limitation when social desirability bias is considered. Although most teachers will not admit to possessing social desirability, school leaders can provide professional development opportunities that draw from asset-based and anti-ableist approaches. Professional development can address larger systems of inequity, have a positive impact on teacher beliefs, and provide the skills and tools needed to support the inclusive education of students with disabilities. Receiving the survey from a colleague may have been the reason why there was a low response rate and non-equal groups of respondents (based on buildings)—which are two additional limitations of this study.

Lastly, teacher feedback from those who participated in the survey revealed that questions on the MATIES Survey were too broad in nature. Teachers had a difficult time rating statements because the questions may be answered differently based on the severity of various students’ disabilities. Recommendations for limitations are discussed in the next section and also addresses recommendations for further study.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

There are several recommendations for further examination of this study. First, the study should be expanded beyond the small rural demographics of Sunnyside School District. It would be interesting to see if the study results would vary substantially if the study was conducted in a larger school district and/or in a suburban or urban setting.

Additionally, because this study did not focus on *why* teachers possess personal beliefs that create biases about their students and school system, further studies could focus on
uncovering the *why* behind these beliefs. Finding out why teachers hold certain beliefs is the required next step before we can understand what we can do to de-fixate their negative beliefs. This can be accomplished through activities that were recommended for pre-service teachers and professional development opportunities and may include: guest speakers, field work, reflection journals, research projects, presentations, case studies, experiential situations, storytelling, and discussions. By providing teachers with these opportunities, they will feel validated and understood, as well as empowered. Through these actions, trust can also emerge and as result, an inclusive culture can be created.

Also, because the researcher of the current study is a teacher, parent, and community member in the district being investigated it would be beneficial to examine if respondents answered the MATIES Survey questions in a different way if there were no connections between the participants and researcher. Additionally, all of the teachers who participated in the MATIES Survey were veteran teachers who had an average of 21 years of teaching experience. Further studies could include gathering insight into novice teachers’ personal beliefs regarding working with students with disabilities. A correlation between the personal beliefs of novice and veteran teachers in relation to working with disabled students could be examined.

Another recommendation for further study would be to create and implement an instrument in which scenarios regarding specific student needs are detailed. As mentioned above, teachers who completed the survey reported that the questions on the MATIES Survey were too broad in nature. As a result, it was difficult for teachers to rate some statements because they may be answered differently based on the severity of various students’ needs. It would be interesting to see if adding detailed scenarios to the survey would alter the responses to any of the MATIES Survey questions.
A final study focus could explore the perceptions that parents who have children with disabilities hold about teachers’ personal beliefs when working with their disabled children. Since this study is only focused on teacher input, parent voice would provide an additional factor that could help to identify if there is a difference between the teachers’ stated beliefs and what the parents perceive the teachers to believe regarding the provision of an inclusive educational experience for their children with disabilities.

**Conclusion**

The identification of Sunnyside School District’s teachers’ personal beliefs regarding working with students with disabilities that form biases about their students and school system are strong indicators of whether or not barriers are being created when working with disabled students. Unfortunately, these barriers could result in students with disabilities not receiving the inclusive education that they deserve. The implications of this study can lead to positive teacher preparation experiences, inclusive curriculum implementation, and professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators that go together to ensure that student deficit thinking and school system issues are properly addressed. Aforementioned opportunities can have a positive impact on teacher beliefs and provide the skills and tools needed to provide all students with functional needs an equitable educational experience; no matter their abilities, *all* disabled students have a right to an inclusive education.
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Appendix A

MATTIES Survey Questions

1. I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability.

2. I believe that students with a disability should be taught in special education schools.

3. I believe that inclusion facilitates socially appropriate behavior among all students.

4. I believe that any student can learn in the regular curriculum of the school if the curriculum is adapted to meet their individual needs.

5. I believe that students with a disability should be segregated because it is too expensive to modify the physical environment of the school.

6. I believe that students with a disability should be in special education schools so that they do not experience rejection in the regular school.

7. I get frustrated when I have difficulty communicating with students with a disability.

8. I get upset when students with a disability cannot keep up with the day-to-day curriculum in my classroom.

9. I get irritated when I am unable to understand students with a disability.

10. I am uncomfortable including students with a disability in a regular classroom with other students without a disability.

11. I am disconcerted that students with a disability are included in the regular classroom, regardless of the severity of the disability.

12. I get frustrated when I have to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students.

13. I am willing to encourage students with a disability to participate in all social activities in the regular classroom.
14. I am willing to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students regardless of their disability.

15. I am willing to physically include students with a severe disability in the regular classroom with the necessary support.

16. I am willing to modify the physical environment to include students with a disability in the regular classroom.

17. I am willing to adapt my communication techniques to ensure that all students with an emotional and behavioral disorder can be successfully included in the regular classroom.

18. I am willing to adapt the assessment of individual students in order for the inclusive education to take place.

19. Grade span in which you currently work.

20. Write the number of years of professional experience you have in education.

   Professional experience refers to the sum of time being employed as either a teacher and/or principal.

21. Write the amount of experience of special education that you hold. Indicate whether this education was obtained at the collegiate level or through professional development opportunities.

22. Choose the response associated to the level of overall support you feel your administrators provide in an effort for inclusive education to be effective.
Appendix B

MATTIES Survey Results

Specifically, questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 17 were aligned with the deficit thinking model and helped to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that create deficit thinking biases about their students (research question one). Survey question two was: I believe that students with a disability should be taught in special education schools.

Figure 16

Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 2

The Pie Chart in Figure 16 shows that of the 33 respondents, 39.4% (13) disagreed, 21.2% (7) somewhat disagreed, 18.2% (6) somewhat agreed, 3% (1) agreed, and 18.2% (6) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, three of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) strongly disagreed, six of the 15 respondents disagreed, four of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated,
four of them disagreed and three of them somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, three of them strongly agreed, three disagreed, three somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, and one agreed with the question.

Survey question three was: I believe that inclusion facilitates socially appropriate behavior among all students.

**Figure 17**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 3*

The Pie Chart in Figure 17 shows that of the 33 respondents 9.1% (3) strongly disagreed, 3% (1) disagreed, 9.1% (3) somewhat disagreed, 18.2% (6) somewhat agreed, 39.4% (13) agreed, and 21.2% (7) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) two strongly disagreed, one of the 15 respondents disagreed, one of the respondents somewhat disagreed, one of the respondents somewhat agreed, seven agreed, and three strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school
building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one of them somewhat disagreed, four somewhat agreed and two of them agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, four agreed, and four strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 4 was, I believe that any student can learn in the regular curriculum of the school if the curriculum is adapted to meet their individual needs.

**Figure 18**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 4*

The Pie Chart in Figure 18 shows that of the 33 respondents 9.1% (3) strongly disagreed, 24.2% (8) disagreed, 9.1% somewhat (3) disagreed, 24.2% (8) somewhat agreed, 24.2% (8) agreed, and 9.1% (3) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one strongly disagreed, four of the 15 respondents disagreed, four of the respondents somewhat agreed, five of the respondents agreed, and one
strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, one disagreed, one somewhat agreed, two somewhat agreed, and two of them agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, two somewhat disagreed, two somewhat agreed, one agreed, and two strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 7 was: I get frustrated when I have difficulty communicating with students with a disability.

**Figure 19**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 7*

The Pie Chart in Figure 19 shows that of the 33 respondents 27.3% (9) strongly disagreed, 36.4% (12) disagreed, 15.2% (5) somewhat disagreed, 18.2% (6) somewhat agreed, and 3% (1) agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) five strongly disagreed, five of the 15 respondents
disagreed, three of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and two of them somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, three of them strongly disagreed, four disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, two somewhat agreed, and one agreed with the question.

Survey question 9 was: I get irritated when I am unable to understand students with a disability.

**Figure 20**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 9*

The Pie Chart in Figure 20 shows that of the 33 respondents 36.4% (12) disagreed, 15.2% (5) somewhat disagreed, 9.1% (3) somewhat agreed, and 3% (1) agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) eight strongly disagreed, five of the 15 respondents disagreed, one of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and one somewhat agreed with the
question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, four disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one of them somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, three of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, three somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, and one agreed with the question.

Survey question 10 was: I am uncomfortable including students with a disability in a regular classroom with other students without a disability.

**Figure 21**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 10*

The Pie Chart in Figure 21 shows that of the 33 respondents 48.5% (16) strongly disagreed, 33.3% (11) disagreed, 9.1% (3) somewhat disagreed, 3% (1) agreed, and 6.1% (2) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) nine strongly disagreed, five of the 15 respondents disagreed, and one of the respondents strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school
building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one of them agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, five of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, two somewhat disagreed, and one somewhat agreed with the question.

Survey question 11 was: I am disconcerted that students with a disability are included in the regular classroom, regardless of the severity of the disability.

**Figure 22**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 11*

The Pie Chart in Figure 22 shows that of the 33 respondents 33.3% (11) strongly disagreed, 42.4% (14) disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat disagreed, 12.1% (4) somewhat agreed, and 6.1% (2) agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) seven strongly disagreed, five of the 15 respondents disagreed, one of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the
question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, one somewhat agreed, and one of them agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, two of them strongly disagreed, six disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, and one agreed with the question.

Survey question 13 was, I am willing to encourage students with a disability to participate in all social activities in the regular classroom.

**Figure 23**

_Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 13_

The Pie Chart in Figure 23 shows that of the 33 respondents 3% (1) strongly disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed, 39.4% (13) agreed, and 51.5% (17) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) six agreed and nine strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, two agreed, and four strongly agreed with the question. In the
high school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, one of them somewhat agreed, five agreed, and five strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 17 was: I am willing to adapt my communication techniques to ensure that all students with an emotional and behavioral disorder can be successfully included in the regular classroom.

Figure 24

Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 17

The Pie Chart in Figure 24 shows that of the 33 respondents 6.1% (2) somewhat disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed, 45.5% (15) agreed, and 42.4% (14) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one somewhat agreed, five agreed, and nine strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two somewhat disagreed and five agreed with the question. In the high
school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, one of them somewhat agreed, five agreed, and five strongly agreed with the question.

Questions 1, 5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 18 were aligned with systematic issues and aided in identifying teachers’ personal beliefs that can form biases about the school system (research question two). Survey question 1 was: I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability.

**Figure 25**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 1*

![Pie Chart](image)

The Pie Chart in Figure 25 shows that of the 33 respondents 12.1% (4) strongly disagreed, 3% (1) disagreed, 3% (1) somewhat disagreed, 3% (1) somewhat agreed, 36.4% (12) agreed, and 42.4% (14) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one strongly disagreed, one somewhat agreed, four agreed, and nine strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one strongly disagreed, two somewhat disagreed, one
disagreed, and three agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the eleven teachers who participated, two of them strongly disagreed, five agreed, and four strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 5 was: I believe that students with a disability should be segregated because it is too expensive to modify the physical environment of the school.

**Figure 26**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 5*

The Pie Chart in Figure 26 shows that of the 33 respondents 42.4% (14) strongly disagreed, 33.3% (11) disagreed, 12.1% (4) somewhat disagreed, and 12.1% (4) somewhat agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) seven strongly disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, six disagreed, and one somewhat agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two strongly disagreed, two disagreed, and three somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the
eleven teachers who participated, five of them strongly disagreed, three somewhat disagreed, and three disagreed with the question.

Survey question 6 was: I believe that students with a disability should be in special education schools so that they do not experience rejection in the regular school.

**Figure 27**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 6*

The Pie Chart in Figure 27 shows that of the 33 respondents 36.4% (12) strongly disagreed, 48.5% (16) disagreed, 9.1% (3) somewhat disagreed, and 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) seven strongly disagreed and eight disagreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, four disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, five of them strongly disagreed, four disagreed, and two somewhat disagreed with the question.
Survey question 8 was: I get upset when students with a disability cannot keep up with the day-to-day curriculum in my classroom.

Figure 28

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 8*

The Pie Chart in Figure 28 shows that of the 33 respondents 33.3% (11) strongly disagreed, 30.3% (10) disagreed, 18.2% (6) somewhat disagreed, and 18.2% (6) somewhat agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) six strongly disagreed, five disagreed, three somewhat disagreed, and one somewhat agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two strongly disagreed, two disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, three of them strongly disagreed, three disagreed, two somewhat disagreed, and three somewhat agreed with the question.
Survey question 12 was: I get frustrated when I have to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students.

Figure 29

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 12*

The Pie Chart in Figure 29 shows that of the 33 respondents 39.4% (13) strongly disagreed, 42.4% (14) disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat disagreed, 9.1% (3) somewhat agreed, and 3% (1) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) eight strongly disagreed, five disagreed, and two somewhat agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, two strongly disagreed, three disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one somewhat agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, three of them strongly disagreed, six disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one strongly agreed with the question.
Survey question 14 was: I am willing to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students regardless of their disability.

**Figure 30**

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 14*

The Pie Chart in Figure 30 shows that of the 33 respondents 6.1% (2) strongly disagreed, 3% (1) disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed, 45.5% (15) agreed, and 33.3% (11) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, two somewhat agreed, five agreed, and six strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one strongly disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, four agreed, and one strongly agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, six agreed, and four strongly agreed with the question.
Survey question 15 was, I am willing to modify the physical environment to include students with a disability in the regular classroom.

Figure 31

*Pie Chart for MATIES Survey Question 15*

The Pie Chart in Figure 31 shows that of the 33 respondents 3% (1) somewhat disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed, 54.5% (18) agreed, and 36.4% (12) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one somewhat agreed, seven agreed, and seven strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one somewhat agreed, five agreed, and one strongly agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, one of them somewhat agreed, six agreed, and four strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 16 was: I am willing to modify the physical environment to include students with a disability in the regular classroom.
The Pie Chart in Figure 32 shows that of the 33 respondents 6.1% (2) somewhat disagreed, 6.1% (2) somewhat agreed, 45.5% (15) agreed, and 42.4% (14) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) one somewhat agreed, four agreed, and ten strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one somewhat disagreed, two somewhat agreed, three agreed, and one strongly agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, one of them somewhat agreed, five agreed, and five strongly agreed with the question.

Survey question 18 was: I am willing to adapt the assessment of individual students in order for the inclusive education to take place.
The Pie Chart in Figure 33 shows that of the 33 respondents 3% (1) strongly disagreed, 3% (1) somewhat disagreed, 3% (1) somewhat agreed, 42.4% (14) agreed, and 48.5% (16) strongly agreed with the question.

When disaggregated into building/grade levels, of the 15 teachers who responded in the elementary building (grades Pre-K-5) seven agreed and eight strongly agreed with the question. In the middle school building (grades 6-8), of the seven teachers who participated, one somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, three agreed, and two strongly agreed with the question. In the high school building (grades 9-12), of the 11 teachers who participated, one of them strongly disagreed, four agreed, and six strongly agreed with the question.

Figure 8 shows the MATTIES Survey results for research question one. Specifically, questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17 were aligned with the deficit thinking model and helped to identify teachers’ personal beliefs that create deficit thinking biases about their students. For question 2, the desired responses would lie within the disagreement range (strongly disagree,
disagree, somewhat disagree) while the non-desired responses fell under the agreement range (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree). Of the 33 respondents, 26 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while seven fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 3 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 26 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while seven fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 4 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 19 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while 14 fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 7 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 26 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while seven fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 9 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 29 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while four fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 10 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 30 fell within the
disagreement range and were non-biased responses while three fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 11 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 27 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while six fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 13 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 32 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while 1 fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 17 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 31 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while 2 fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

Figure 9 shows the MATTIES Survey results for research question two. Questions 1, 5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 18 were aligned with systematic issues and aided in identifying teachers’ personal beliefs that can form biases about the school system. The desired responses for question 1 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 28 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while 5 fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 1 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 28 fell within the
agreement range and were non-biased responses while five fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 5 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 29 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while five fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 6 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 31 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while two fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 8 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 27 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while six fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 12 fell within the disagreement range and the non-desired responses were within the agreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 29 fell within the disagreement range and were non-biased responses while four fell under the agreement range and showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 14 fell within the agreement range and the non-desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 28 fell within the agreement range and were non-biased responses while five fell under the disagreement range and showed incidents of bias.
The desired responses for question 15 fell within the agreement range and the non-
desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 32 fell within the 
agreement range and were non-biased responses while one fell under the disagreement range and 
showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 16 fell within the agreement range and the non-
desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 32 fell within the 
agreement range and were non-biased responses while one fell under the disagreement range and 
showed incidents of bias.

The desired responses for question 18 fell within the agreement range and the non-
desired responses were within the disagreement range. Of the 33 respondents, 31 fell within the 
agreement range and were non-biased responses while two fell under the disagreement range and 
showed incidents of bias.
Duquesne University
Institutional Review Board
Protocol #: 2023/2023
Verified On: 03/26/2023
Expires: No Expiration Date

Appendix C
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Equitable Education for All: Identifying Teacher Beliefs About Working with Students with Disabilities

INVESTIGATOR: Chelsea Sharek, Ed.D. of Educational Leadership Student, Duquesne University, phone: 724-971-9183, e-mail: swesey314@duq.edu

ADVISOR: Gretchen Givens Generett, Ph. D., Dean and Professor, School of Education, Duquesne University, phone: 412-396-1890, e-mail: generettg@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:
This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in education at Duquesne University.

STUDY OVERVIEW:
In essence, all students, no matter their abilities, deserve an equitable education. The identification of teachers’ beliefs and biases when serving students with disabilities can be strong indicators of whether barriers are being created when working with disabled students that result in these students not receiving the equitable education they deserve. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to investigate the personal beliefs K-12 teachers have when working with students with disabilities that could create biases about their students and school systems that may form barriers when working with this student population at Sunnyside School District. Once their beliefs and biases are revealed, school leaders can focus on professional development that will provide teachers with the skills and tools needed to contribute to more positive beliefs about working with students with functional needs, thus resulting in students with disabilities receiving an equitable education.

PURPOSE:
You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating the beliefs and biases K-12 teachers have about working with students with disabilities.

In order to qualify for participation, you must:

- complete an anonymous survey

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to complete an anonymous survey. The survey being used is the MATIES (Multidimensional Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale). This survey utilizes a Likert-type scale that allows for six ratings in consideration of beliefs and biases that create barriers when working with students with disabilities - Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree. Questions on the survey align with the research of belief fixation theory, deficit thinking model, and school system barriers. These questions are asked to identify teacher beliefs and biases that create barriers when working with students with disabilities.

In this study, all 104 teachers (special education, general education, specials teachers) of all grade levels (K-12) will be given the opportunity to be in the sample because they represent differing opinions on teachers’ beliefs when working with students with disabilities. If all participants chose to partake, the sample size would include 104 individuals. Every teacher in the selected school district has the opportunity to partake in this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. The benefits of participating in this study include assisting in the revelation of various factors that may contribute to how teachers’ personal beliefs can create biases about their students or the school system that may form barriers when working with students with disabilities, thus not providing them with the equitable education that they deserve. Conclusively, the implications of the study can lead to future professional development opportunities in which teachers will be called to identify and challenge their current beliefs and biases, create a state of genuine doubt in which their beliefs and biases are altered, and be able to provide all disabled students, no matter their abilities, an equitable education.

COMPENSATION:

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

There is no cost for you to participate in this research project.
CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible, and will be destroyed within 1 year after the data collection is complete. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure in a password protected computer. In addition, any publications or presentations about this research will only use data that is combined together with all subjects; therefore, no one will be able to determine how you responded.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence by contacting the researcher at csharek@rbcasd.com.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researcher and requesting it. The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Any information collected that can identify you will not be used for future research studies, nor will it be provided to other researchers.

COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS

The survey is electronic, so all social distancing, sanitation, mask guidelines, transportation concerns have been considered and are being implemented.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Chelsea Sharek, Ed.D. of Educational Leadership Student, Duquesne University, phone: 724-971-9183, e-mail: csharek@rbcasd.com or Gretchen Givens Generett, Ph. D., Dean and Professor,
School of Education, Duquesne University, phone: 412-396-1890, e-mail: generettg@duq.edu. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

This project has been approved/verified by Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board.

Proceeding to the next page indicates your voluntary consent to participate in this project.
To: Chelsea Shank
From: David Dalmonico, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #2023/02/12
Date: 03/26/2023

The protocol #2023/02/12, Equitable Education for All: Identifying Teacher Beliefs About Working with Students with Disabilities has been verified by the Institutional Review Board as Exempt according to 45CFR46.101(b)(1); (1) Educational Research on 03/26/2023.

If applicable, the consent form and/or recruitment letter have been stamped and are attached to this email or are accessible via Mentor. Please use these stamped versions to distribute or display.

Exempt status means there is no specific expiration date, and you are not required to file annual reviews or termination reports. However, any unanticipated problems, adverse effects on subjects, or protocol deviations must be immediately reported to the IRB Chair before proceeding with the study.

Further, any changes to your study requires the filing of an amendment and is subject to the approval of the IRB Chair. You must wait for approval before implementing any changes to the original protocol. Changes to your protocol may affect the exempt status of your research.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this study.

Best wishes in your research.

David Dalmonico, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board, Chair
irb@duq.edu