Inclusion or Special Education Resource: Teacher Perceptions of Placement Decisions on Academic Growth

Casey Story
Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.cu-portland.edu/edudissertations
Part of the Education Commons

CU Commons Citation
https://commons.cu-portland.edu/edudissertations/159
Concordia University–Portland
College of Education
Doctorate of Education Program

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE
CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ AND APPROVE THE DISSERTATION OF

Casey Reed Story

CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Brandy Kamm, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee
Michael J. Hollis, Ph.D., Content Specialist
Peggy Dupey, Ed.D., Content Reader
Inclusion or Special Education Resource:

Teacher Perceptions of Placement Decisions on Academic Growth

Casey Reed Story

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Higher Education

Brandy Kamm, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

Michael J. Hollis, Ph.D., Content Specialist

Peggy Dupey, Ed.D., Content Reader

Concordia University–Portland

2018
Abstract

This qualitative study explored the thoughts and perceptions of 16 teachers and their experiences working with special education students. The programming options most often offered by school districts are general education inclusion or a separate resource setting, yet there is a limited amount of research showing actual academic progress to guide decision-making. The following question was central to the research: Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? Data analysis led to the identification of the following six themes: behavior interfering with teaching, student’s academic progress with content, need for socialization, district-level concerns, programming depends on individual students, and the need for both settings. The information collected suggested that providing a combination of general education inclusion together with a separate special education setting was the best way to encourage academic success. This should be done on an individual basis but all options within the continuum of services should be available. The results obtained from the present study provide a greater understanding of teacher perceptions in both general education and specialized settings and the type of educational supports that are most beneficial and necessary to the academic success of students with special needs.

Keywords: special education, general education, resource, inclusion, academic success, continuum of services, least restrictive environment
Dedication

To my amazing, patient, and supportive family: my husband John and our children Johnny, Julia and Emily. I am blessed to have you in my life and there are no words to express how much I love you all. There is absolutely no way I could have completed this without you.
Acknowledgements

First, I thank God for placing the perfect doctoral program in my path and helping me to find a greater understanding of what it means to be faith-centered. I would also like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Brandy Kamm, and the others in my committee for always believing in me and giving great advice.

Next, I am grateful to my mom, Barbara, who has always been a strong supporter and cheerleader every time I wanted to further my education. To my brother, Roger, your belief and reassurance helped push me to reach this goal. My best friend, Wendy, you have been the perfect sounding board and … I know I have told you how important your friendship has been to me since we met in 10th grade English class, but let me reiterate—I would never have finished this without you! To my good friend, Joe … you have always been my technology support person and never complained when I needed help. I appreciate all the times you listened to my concerns and helped me figure everything out. To the most influential person from my work family, Debbie, I appreciate each year that we have known each other and worked together. Thank you to all my administrators for allowing me to complete my research and take off each day I needed to meet my deadlines. Finally, to the 16 teachers that became part of my study—this really would never have happened without you. There are numerous other people I would like to acknowledge but there are too many to name. You know who you are, so thank you for every word of encouragement that you gave.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ........................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................... 1

- Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem ............ 2
- Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................ 5
- Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................... 6
- Research Questions ..................................................................................................... 9
- Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study .................................................. 9
- Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 11
- Limitations and Delimitations .................................................................................... 14
- Summary ..................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................... 17

- Conceptual Framework .............................................................................................. 18
- Themes Relating to the Framework ............................................................................ 22
- Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature ............................... 24
  - Setting options for students with disabilities ......................................................... 24
  - Additional factors related to why and how students are placed ......................... 28
- Review of Methodological Issues .............................................................................. 36
Summary ............................................................................................................................................. 65

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results ................................................................................................. 68

Description of the Sample .................................................................................................................. 69

Research Methodology and Analysis ................................................................................................. 70

Phenomenological case study .......................................................................................................... 70

Summary of the Findings .................................................................................................................... 71

Presentation of the Data and Results ................................................................................................. 71

Challenges within an inclusive setting ............................................................................................... 72

Successes within an inclusive setting ............................................................................................... 76

Challenges within a special education setting ................................................................................... 79

Successes within a special education setting ..................................................................................... 81

Themes ................................................................................................................................................ 84

Theme: Behavior interfering with teaching ....................................................................................... 84

Theme: Student’s academic progress with content ............................................................................ 89

Theme: Need for socialization ............................................................................................................ 95

Theme: District-level concerns .......................................................................................................... 98

Theme: Programming depends on individual students .................................................................... 107

Theme: Need for a combination of inclusion and specialized settings .............................................. 110

Role of the Researcher .......................................................................................................................... 116

Summary ............................................................................................................................................. 117
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion ................................................................. 119

Summary of the Results .................................................................................. 120

Discussion of the Results .............................................................................. 122

Connections between Themes and Research Questions .............................. 123

   Central research question ......................................................................... 123

   Subsequent research question 1 ............................................................... 124

   Subsequent research question 2 ............................................................... 124

   Subsequent research question 3 ............................................................... 125

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature ........................................ 126

Limitations .................................................................................................... 128

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory .......................... 129

Recommendations for Further Research ....................................................... 132

Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 132

References ..................................................................................................... 134

Appendix A: Research Questions for Individual Interviews with General Education Teachers. 144

Appendix B: Research Questions for Individual Interviews with Special Education Teachers. 145

Appendix C: Informed Consent ...................................................................... 146

Appendix D: Permissions Letter to Conduct Research .................................... 148

Appendix E: Statement of Original Work ....................................................... 149
List of Tables

Table 1 Challenges within an Inclusive Setting ................................................................. 73
Table 2 Successes within an Inclusive Setting ................................................................. 77
Table 3 Challenges within a Special Education Setting .................................................. 80
Table 4 Successes within a Special Education Setting .................................................... 82
Table 5 Socialization ........................................................................................................... 95
Table 6 District-level Concerns ........................................................................................ 99
Table 7 Programming Depends on Individual Students ................................................ 107
Table 8 Specialized Settings ............................................................................................. 110
List of Figures

Figure 1 Behavior Interfering with Teaching ................................................................. 85

Figure 2 Student’s Academic Progress and Struggles with Content in Inclusive Settings .......... 90

Figure 3 Student’s Academic Progress and Struggles with Content in Special Settings .......... 93

Figure 4 Need for a Combination of Inclusion and Specialized Settings ................................ 111
Chapter 1: Introduction

The number of students in the American educational system classified as having a disability is approximately 13% of the total student population (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). The most recent data reports from the NCES are from the 2013 to 2014 school year, where approximately 6.5 million students were served under special education programs. This number has been growing since data collection began in 1976 (NCES, 2016). Among the various eligibility categories, students with specific learning disabilities continue to be the highest percentage at approximately 35% (NCES, 2016).

Parents of students with special needs want their children treated equally and educators want learning to be meaningful for all students; however, it is hard to come to a consensus on how to achieve both these factors. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities be educated in an appropriate manner (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Laws about the least restrictive environment (LRE) were introduced to ensure that all students with disabilities were educated with their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). There are many things to consider when determining placement options for students with special needs. The question as to whether these students show more academic success in an inclusive general education classroom versus a special education classroom is still left unanswered (Wilson, Kim, & Michaels, 2011). There seems to be more evidence supporting inclusion to improve socialization rather than to support inclusion for academic advancement (Naraian, 2011). Many special education students in inclusive secondary classrooms have not shown a lot of academic progress, even with co-teaching or pull-outs (Ford, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to determine which is more important: LRE for increased socialization or for academic success. With more research and data collection showing the benefits of inclusion
versus resource settings, it may be possible to determine where students are improving academically.

All children deserve a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), but the term special education indicates that some students are different than others (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Chapter 1 introduces the topic of appropriate educational programming for students with disabilities, presents the overall rationale and relevance, as well as the purpose and expected outcome of the study. The design of the study is informed by the literature, which is guided by the research questions. Chapter 1 also presents definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

**Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

The United States federal government continues to regulate and maintain control over certain aspects of education, while some sections are left up to the state to interpret. Many of the laws and regulations that are unique to equal education rights of all students, including those with learning disabilities and other special needs, are specified in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001. Over a decade ago, clarification for educating students with disabilities was provided in *IDEA* (2004). *IDEA* (2004) continues to be updated and clarified and the 2004 legislation remains the framework to specify regulations for the education of all individuals (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The purpose of these federal statutes is to define the required services and supports necessary for all students to progress in education. To monitor the progress obtained by all students, NCLB (2001) mandates that each state should give all students an annual academic assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). With this accountability measure, a focus arose towards students with disabilities who were not showing adequate progress. Improving the education of students with disabilities is addressed and further clarified
in IDEA (2004). These federal laws and regulations together provide the legislative basis for determining programming decisions for students with special needs.

IDEA (2004) mandates that students with special needs receive an education in the LRE and that they are provided with all the necessary supports within the classroom to have access to the general education curriculum at the highest level possible. This legislation also dictates that students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent possible with their non-disabled peers by taking the whole student into account, including academic level, socialization needs, behavior, and intellectual ability. The inclusion of special education students must also not interfere with the overall education of general education students when the amount or type of support is so significant that teaching within the classroom is altered (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The continuum of alternative placements mentioned within this legislation clearly states that students with disabilities should be educated in the best environment to make sufficient progress and that several options must be offered to address individual needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). These options range from full inclusion within the general education classroom to a self-contained environment within a special education classroom. There are several options in between to address the individual needs and various abilities of special education students (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Although the continuum of alternative placements has been a part of federal legislation, each state has control over what their districts must provide, which can vary from district to district. Due to this variation, there is limited research that addresses placements strictly in terms of the academic needs of students with disabilities who require modifications to the curriculum. There is still a need to determine which of these academic settings is ideal for addressing the needs of all students, including those
with specific learning disabilities in reading, mathematics, and writing (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The existing research that addresses the LRE is related to three categories or characteristics that are applied when determining placements as follows: socialization, behavior, and academic success, with the last one containing the least amount of definitive research. The largest amount of research centers on the socialization needs of students with disabilities and access to students without disabilities (Naraian, 2011). There is a multitude of research focused on improving the teaching strategies used for students with disabilities (Scanlon & Baker, 2012), as well as increasing self-containment for the higher level of need students due to behavioral issues (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013), but there is little mention of which environment special education students gain the most knowledge.

Previous studies have identified the need for additional research on the influence of the different learning environments and any associated academic success. However, these studies are narrow in nature and discuss many other factors that detract from the academic achievement of student outcomes. Such research raises further questions as to where students show greater academic success and progress, and how programming decisions for students with disabilities are made when there are limited options available. Additional variables that show in the research and further confuse the results include characteristics such as age or grade level (Lyons, Huber, Carter, Chen, & Asmus, 2016; McLeskey, Waldron & Redd, 2012), placement options, location of study (Arduin, 2015), and significance of disability (Ruppar, 2015). There is limited research that includes parent and student perceptions. Research has been undertaken that scratches the surface of educator perception (Berry, 2010); however, teacher perception data is not unique to the academic success of students with disabilities and does not clarify whether they are more
successful in a general education or special education environment. Since the focus for the present study is on academic success, educators are the logical place to start to collect data. It is important to determine how teachers perceive the current processes and programming options that are available. A beneficial follow-up study would then be to include student and parent perceptions.

Statement of the Problem

Students with special needs are being placed into settings based on non-educational factors including family choice, type or level of disability, and funding (Kurth, 2015), when another important factor should also be considered, (i.e., what setting is most likely to encourage academic success). There is an abundance of research that supports general education inclusion for improved socialization (Feldman, Carter, Asmus, & Brock, 2016); however, there is limited research that undoubtedly states that general education inclusion is what is best for the academic success of students with severe learning disabilities. Special education settings such as a ‘resource room,’ which is typically in a separate setting away from general education classes, have been developed to offer an intensive model of re-teaching and repetition, as well as provide a focus on broad skills rather than the many specific requirements of the general education curriculum (Education Service Center [ESC] 18, 2016). When a student is below grade level, many challenges can occur within a general education classroom when the teachers are held to a high, rigorous standard and strict timetable (Mattison, 2011). Students with disabilities need accommodations and modifications that will significantly influence the level at which they learn and retain information (Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010). These changes may or may not be successful in a general education classroom and, when it is not, there needs to be a place
for those students to be educated. At some point, socialization becomes less critical and academic success becomes the focus of placement decisions.

To further complicate the discussion, some special education students struggle to keep up academically when taking courses in the general education classroom (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011); therefore, placing these students into special education classes is not always appropriate (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011b). The problem is that special education students need to be educated in the LRE. However, because of their specialized instructional needs, these students are not always successful in such a setting (Ford, 2013; Fuchs et al., 2015; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011b). The scope of concerns leads to considering many other factors when deciding on placement or programs for students with special needs (Kurth, 2015). Instead of immediately putting students with special needs into special education classes, general education classrooms may need to be structured differently or have better teacher training to enhance learning (Eller, Fisher, Gilchrest, Rozman, & Shockney, 2016; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011a; Mintz & Wyse, 2015; Ruppar, 2015). For all special education students, there must the option of appropriate settings that range from full inclusion to specialized environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Some school districts have removed or reduced some of the setting options, specifically the resource option where there is a special education teacher leading instruction for a group of special education students and replaced this option with inclusion classes. There is limited proof as to what setting is better for special education students.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding whether special education students should be educated in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes. A phenomenological case study method was
utilized to explore teachers’ views about their personal experiences related to teaching students with special needs. The general education teachers were asked to describe their academic successes and failures, provide insight into the effectiveness of their teaching methods, and whether they felt knowledgeable about how to provide accommodations and modifications for special education students. The special education teachers were asked questions about their experiences teaching students with special needs in inclusive settings, as well as in specialized settings such as pull-outs and resource classes. Both groups were asked to discuss in which setting they felt that the special education students showed the most academic growth. Some people feel that students with disabilities should be included in the regular classroom (Tomlinson, 2015), whereas others believe they need to stay in a special classroom (Causton-Theoharis, Cosier, Theoharis, & Orsati, 2011).

There are limited studies that highlight the use of academic success to determine placement within general education or special education classrooms (Wilson et al., 2011). Many studies about special education tend to focus on the social (Feldman et al., 2016) and behavioral needs (Mattison & Blader, 2013) of the students, as well as how to improve the co-teaching environment (Murawski, 2012). Such studies do not identify academic success as a factor for consideration. Therefore, the existing research does not demonstrate a conclusive way to determine which setting is better regarding academic progress, nor does the research provide a thick description of educator views. Inclusion is not for everyone and should not be treated as the only option (Mitchell, 2015). Many special education students require a specific setting to learn appropriately, which might be difficult to achieve in the general education setting (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Special education students may not be academically prepared for inclusion into general education classes, and yet some school districts are limiting or
completely removing the special education resource setting. The LRE is important but academic success is just as important, so if a student needs to be in a special classroom, then the option should be available (Hyatt & Filler, 2011).

It is important to better understand the relationship between placement decisions and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. The decision to apply a qualitative approach in the present study was due to the limited amount of relevant literature specific to academic outcomes for students with disabilities within various settings. The use of this phenomenological methodology is appropriate because the study considers the actual experiences and perceptions of 16 teachers (Creswell, 2013), including six special education and 10 general education teachers from one rural public school district in Texas. Additionally, only secondary teachers working with students with special needs in one or both of the studied settings, (i.e., general education inclusion and special education resource were included). Teachers spend many hours with these students daily and it is the lived experiences of these teachers working with students in the general education inclusion classroom as well as in the separate special education setting that provides an indication of student success. The present study will provide information to administrators and other school leaders to determine effective programming or service delivery options and places of instruction to improve academic success for students with disabilities.

The shared experiences of these groups of educators led to the emergence of common themes rather than a statistical interpretation of quantitative data. A qualitative research approach is selected when there is a need to understand the relationship between a specific phenomenon and other variables (Creswell, 2013). Using interviews, the researcher can facilitate a deeper understanding of meaning and perceptions of educators (Seidman, 2006). A phenomenological case study is relevant because of the shared experiences of the educators
interviewed who work within the same district that previously offered a full range of services but no longer offers a resource setting. I created a semi-structured open-ended interview, which allowed participants to elaborate and provide deep explanations that led to a greater understanding of educator perceptions of placement decisions and the effect on students with special needs (Yin, 2014).

**Research Questions**

The focus of this phenomenological case study was to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding the academic outcomes of special education students in different educational settings. Due to the confines of available evidence, the present study was developed to examine the central question: Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? The study is further supported by the subsequent questions:

Q1. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting?

Q2. What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful?

Q3. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

Qualitative studies are common in social science and educational fields (Seidman, 2006). To begin the research process, it is important to gather qualitative data from existing educators about special education students. In the future, it will be conducive to undertake more specific
student-based research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Being able to determine which setting is the best will assist educators in knowing which option to provide to students with disabilities. Not all students with special needs are the same and neither are the settings all the same. Much of the present research identifies continual needs around special education, with the requirement that additional research continues to look at quantitative methods for gathering data. The existing research leads to more questions about the actual results of inclusive environments that lead to the academic success or failure of students with special needs. There is also conflicting evidence on whether inclusion or specialized settings are more beneficial, and there is a surplus of research that brings in many additional variables that confound conclusions. Research regarding actual academic success is limited, particularly at the secondary level, and most research that supports or denies inclusive practices tends to focus on co-teaching methods and increasing professional development to make the inclusion model better (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011; Hyatt & Filler, 2011; King-Sears, 2008; Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel, & Black, 2009; Scanlon & Baker, 2012). Meanwhile, the students are the ones who suffer at the expense of educators not having a clear reason for choosing programming settings (Eller et al., 2016). The details of the successes or failures of special education students obtained from the present study could provide baseline information to be applied in future studies.

When laws to encourage inclusive settings were introduced, it was with the understanding that individual needs would be considered (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). However, additional variables such as funding, that have nothing to do with the students are being used to determine placement and programming for students in special education (Banks, Frawley & McCoy, 2015). Academic success is the goal of education, but other factors like behavior, overpower academic results. The limited data in support of either the inclusive setting
or the resource setting does not clearly explain that the outcomes and decisions are still being made arbitrarily. Focus has remained on how to change or improve the instruction (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011), behavior (Mattison, 2011), or socialization of students with special needs (Lyons et al., 2016), rather than on academic success. Additional research may help guide educators in placing students in the appropriate setting for maximum academic success.

**Definition of Terms**

Operational definitions of the terms used in the present study are provided to ensure consistent understanding throughout this research. The majority of definitions are sourced from federal legislation or from federal regulation documents where further explanation is provided, whereas other definitions are sourced from state education agency website where local guidance is provided, as well as peer-reviewed articles that specify characteristics.

**Academic success.** This term is defined as how a student is performing using various criteria such as grades and participation in activities, as well as teacher perceptions of student understanding. Academic success can include anything that educators use to form an opinion of where a student is making educational progress.

**Accommodations.** This term is defined as supports provided to students that change how a student accesses the material, without changing the content. Accommodations may also assist students by changing procedures to help make learning more meaningful (ESC 18, 2016).

**Continuum of alternative placements or services.** This term is defined as the provision of a range of service options available to students with disabilities including regular classes, special classes, and separate schools, as well as additional services such as a resource room or other provisions with general placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
Co-teaching. This term is defined as when a special education certified teacher is added to a general education classroom to share teaching responsibilities and implement services for special education students (Ford, 2013).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** This legislation amended the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 and replaced the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. ESSA requires that all students are taught under high academic standards and reauthorizes some of the specific certification requirements for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

**Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).** This term is defined as all students, including those in special education, under federal legislation will receive educational services at no charge and ensures that each student’s individualized education program (IEP) is followed (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

**General education.** This term is defined as a regular teacher or type of student who is in a regular classroom being taught the entire range of regular curriculum by a regular teacher. General education is also a type of setting; sometimes referred to as access to the general curriculum (AGC) (ESC 18, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

**Individualized education program (IEP).** This term is defined as an individualized written document required for each student in special education that clarifies the necessary supports, services, placement, and programming specific to that student (ESC 18, 2016).

**Inclusion.** This term is defined as the integration of students with special needs into the general education classroom and participation in regular social activities (ESC 18, 2016).

**Least restrictive environment (LRE).** This term is defined as, To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are
not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with
disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or
severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of
supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (U.S. Department of
Education, 2004, p. 31)

**Mainstream(ed).** This term is defined as students who are included in the general
classroom and receive minimal supports based on their IEP, usually without a special education
teacher (Kurth, 2015).

**Modification/Modified Content.** This term is defined as changes to an assignment,
specific content, or the entire curriculum that lowers the skill level or grade-specific standard
required from students in special education (ESC 18, 2016).

**No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** This term is defined as a federal law that is
designed to reduce the achievement gap among students of all ability levels and to ensure that no
child is left behind, including the disadvantaged (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

**Pull-out method.** This term is defined as when a student is placed within a general
education classroom but is removed periodically to receive specialized instruction by a special
education teacher (Ford, 2013).

**Resource.** This term is defined as a special education setting where there is a special
education teacher leading instruction for a group of special education students; typically,
resource is in a separate setting away from general education classes (State Board of Education,
2015).

**Self-contained.** This term is defined as a separate special education setting taught by a
special education teacher for students that require significant curriculum alternatives and who are
unable to participate in the general setting for the majority of the school day (State Board of Education, 2015).

**Special education/Special needs.** This term is defined as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 3).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Two limitations of this study are the breadth of special education and the final sample size that was obtained. Special education is such an area that it is difficult to narrow the focus and gather data on more than one or two concepts in a single study. Many times special education students exhibit characteristics of more than one type of disability or need. Teachers interact with multiple students and can have difficulty separating various experiences to one factor. This creates a limitation since many of the variables relating to special education overlap, such as academic success, behavior or type of disability. These need to be separated to focus on the true aspects of the problem and narrow the outcomes. Even though these factors influence the present study, I emphasized academic success as much as the study would allow. Another limitation is the final sample size. This study includes only 16 teachers from one rural district in Texas. The small sample size from one district limits and directly influences the ability to generalize to larger populations and the results may not be representative of other districts or professionals that share similar experiences.

Significant delimitations of the present study are the selection criteria that further influenced the number of teacher participants that met the requirements. Additionally, the location of the study was chosen because of accessibility. The specific criteria included secondary-level educators with experience teaching special education students; general education
teachers that teach one or more core academic areas; special education teachers with an understanding of, or experience with, inclusive settings; and all teachers needed a minimum number of years teaching in the district. These characteristics were necessary to ensure data was representative of the phenomenon being studied. This purposive and convenient sampling delimited the group of individuals in their shared experiences.

Summary

According to federal guidelines, all students are guaranteed a FAPE in the LRE, including students with special needs and a continuum of services with various levels of programming from self-containment to inclusion has been described for use by districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Some of the suggested settings are:

- residential placements,
- self-contained life skills setting,
- a self-contained adaptive behavior setting,
- a resource setting,
- inclusion, and
- full inclusion (Mitchell, 2015; Wilson, et al., 2011).

In some school districts, schools do not offer the entire range of settings and there is debate over whether academic success improves based on the location of instruction. Students with moderate disabilities such as specific learning disabilities or other health impairments, who may require modifications to the curriculum, are the hardest to determine which setting is best to suit individual needs (Mitchell, 2015).

This chapter included the central question of this phenomenological case study as well as the subsequent questions that allow deeper reflection of the issue. Chapter 1 also included a
discussion of theoretical research, definitions of key concepts and terms, and concluded with the limitations and delimitations of the scope of the study. Chapter 2 comprises a comprehensive literature review that includes a historical summary, previous research findings, current information, as well as a framework to support the qualitative nature of the study to increase the knowledge of perceptions around the debate of how to determine what the LRE for students with disabilities is.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine the perceptions of teachers to determine whether special education students should be educated in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes. The method that school districts use to decide which instructional placement option is the best for students with special needs is difficult to pinpoint, especially when the legislation provides a guide only and individual states have to clarify what LRE and which continuum of alternative placements are required (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Even though special education was designed to be a service and not a place, the differences have evolved and several meanings of LRE and inclusion have resulted (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

To determine existing research and guide future studies, a literature review was completed using a variety of related search terms such as special education, inclusion, resource setting, access to general curriculum, accommodations, modifications, and least restrictive environment. Additional terms included a continuum of services, academic achievement, co-teaching, pull-out programs, and disability. The type of data gathered was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles. The focus was on gathering information from within the last 10 years to determine the extent of current research. Databases with peer-reviewed articles were used most frequently including the Education Resources Information Center, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Journal Storage, Taylor & Francis Online, and Sage Publications Online. The topic of special education is a complicated area and there were many times where the literature repeated or overlapped even when using different search terms. Several subtopics emerged, including:
• the type of disability, • literacy skills,
• limited teacher training, • a continuum of alternative
• funding concerns, placements, and
• behavioral needs, • social integration.

These subtopics were used to organize the research path for the present study. From the literature reviewed, there is no clear-cut answer as to which setting works best for students with disabilities. Rather, the studies all allude to the direction that the particular author is proposing while indicating that special education continues to be an individualized process. Previous studies do exist that attempt to define the best placement for students with special needs; however, it is still important to continue with additional research to ensure each child is receiving the best education afforded to them and that their needs come before the needs of the district.

**Conceptual Framework**

Much of the research reviewed addresses the social aspects of inclusion but does not include questions about the academic success of students with special needs in general education environments (Lyons et al., 2016). In the limited amount of research that does address academic factors, a considerable amount is completed on elementary aged students (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Ford 2013; Lee et al., 2010; McLeskey & Waldron Tremblay, 2011a, 2011b; McLeskey et al., 2012; Tremblay, 2013). Secondary level education must consider other aspects of education, including graduation and post-secondary success. Therefore, what may be appropriate for younger students may not be appropriate for older students in high school (Lyons et al., 2016). In the literature that addresses these upper grade levels, the academic information is minimal and does not provide a complete and accurate picture of the effectiveness of each
setting (Feldman et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2016; Ruppar, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011).

The conceptual foundation for this qualitative study was the theory expressed by Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014), who describe the deficit perspective and social constructivist perspective as applied to special education. The study begins with a thorough look at the history of education relating to special education, and then discusses two opposing viewpoints specifically about inclusion (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). At the culmination of the comprehensive literature review for the present study, the two views described by Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014) closely resemble the two bodies of thought that continue to create a debate on how to educate special education students. The deficit perspective is more commonly aligned to those that believe a separation of general education and special education students is necessary, and the social constructivist perspective is closer to the belief that inclusion is imperative simply because everyone is different and should be treated equally (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). The many aspects revealed via the literature review can be narrowed down into these two categories. A supporting construct is the lack of direction provided by federal guidelines given that public school districts are expected to educate all students, including those with disabilities. Even with the Education for All Children Act, PL 94-142, of 1975 and the reemergence and clarification of IDEA (2004), there are still discrepancies and questions for where to place students with special needs. Reviewing the existing literature showed that there is a lack of material providing the reasons behind placement decision-making, rather than simply being based on whether a student does or does not have special needs.

All students deserve a FAPE (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Since laws have changed and become clearer, the right to a FAPE includes students with special needs; however,
the question of how students are coping within the general education setting is still left unanswered. Among the reasons for creating an inclusive environment was so students in special education were not segregated and kept apart from their non-disabled peers (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Socialization and integration into society have been two of the main arguments of parents for increasing the inclusiveness of students with special needs (Lyons et al., 2016). The definition of special needs can range from very mild disabilities to severe and profound disabilities, yet the law states that all students should be in the LRE and educated with students who are not disabled (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). An IEP committee or Admission Review and Dismissal committee determine placement decisions for special education students (ESC 18, 2016). Thus, even with the law stating that all students should be in the LRE, irrespective of abilities, many students are in separate class settings for a significant portion of the school day (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011a). If the student’s disabilities are so severe or their behavior is disruptive enough that they cannot successfully be in a general education classroom, then the alternative is to place the student in a special education setting with teachers who are trained and certified to deal with these issues (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Unfortunately, this means that some of the high-needs students who are placed into special classes rarely experience daily social or academic settings with non-disabled peers (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Mattison, 2011).

There is also research that shows an abundance of data to support inclusion; however, there are disagreements as to what defines inclusion versus full inclusion. A simplified definition of full inclusion is that a student with special needs spends 80% to 100% of their time in the general education environment, more recently known as mainstreaming (Kurth, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015). Mainstreaming does not usually include a special educator in the classroom.
and is for students that need very limited support within the general education classroom. The definition of inclusion sometimes changes to show the many levels of support provided within the general education environment. There are studies that look at another type of inclusive environment, known as co-teaching, which involves a special education teacher being included within the general education classroom (Ford, 2013; Scanlon & Baker, 2012; Wilson et al., 2011; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009). There are various levels of inclusion that are based on many factors, (e.g., paraprofessionals, an amount of time, type of assistance provided, and so on, with co-teaching being the most common) (King-Sears, 2008; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011b; Todd, 2012; Zigmond et al., 2009). There is an overlap in the research when terms and factors are used interchangeably and sometimes incorrectly, which makes determining which type of inclusion is being discussed very difficult and confusing. For the present study, the research has been categorized to show that full inclusion or mainstreaming refers to a general education setting that does not include a special educator, co-teaching involves a special educator being placed in the general education classroom with teaching duties shared, whereas inclusion indicates part-time specialized support either by a special educator or paraprofessional.

Much of the research signifies that inclusion should be placed on the continuum of alternative placements with various options for delivery of instruction within the general education and special education settings (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2016; McLeskey, & Waldron, 2011b). There are several sides to the argument where the LRE setting students receive the most benefit, including those that understand that for placement to be individualized using a continuum of service options will always be needed. The reviewed research was divided into two broad categories to limit confusion, (i.e., for inclusion (all types) or for special settings). The for inclusion group agrees with practices that integrate students with
special needs with non-disabled peers by providing specialized instruction in the general education classroom (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013; Hang & Rabren, 2009; McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). The for special settings group believes a separate setting is needed for all special education students, at least part of the time (Browder et al., 2009; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Eller et al., 2016; Ford, 2013; Fuchs et al., 2015). The role of the school district is to educate all students, even those with cognitive deficits; therefore, academic progress should be the priority. There is limited data that shows whether inclusion has a positive influence on academic progress rates or grades, without including other factors. Much of the research that supports inclusion also focuses on socialization and behavior (Eller et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2016; Lochman et al., 2012; Mattison & Blader, 2013). Many times, the thing that needs improvement (i.e., behaviors or social skills or even the diagnosis, ends up being the reason why students are removed from the general education setting) (Eller et al., 2016; Feldman et al., 2016). If academic achievements are truly the focus, increased data collection, resources, and references should be gathered to determine in exactly which setting students with of all types of disabilities show the most academic progress (Eller et al., 2016).

**Themes Relating to the Framework**

Even though laws for the LRE exist, students become segregated for various reasons. The reasons include academic levels (Tomlinson, 2015), behavior (Mattison, 2011), funding (Banks et al., 2015), and limited staff training (Mintz & Wyse, 2015). The reasons may also include the type of disability (Browder et al., 2009), various ecological factors (Ruppar, Allcock, & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2016), and social ideology (Arduin, 2015). Even with all the challenges, there should be a way to choose the most appropriate setting for students with special needs, regardless of these other factors.
The reasons for separating or integrating students with special needs are varied, but the most popular reason for inclusion is for socialization with their typically developing peers (Eller et al., 2016; Feldman et al., 2016; Ford, 2013; Kleinert et al., 2015; Ruppar, 2015). Students with disabilities should not be placed in a special needs classroom or special school for the entire day, unless the disabilities are so severe that the learning of others is disrupted (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). One safeguard for this is the IEP committee who consider several things before deciding to separate a student with special needs from the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). General education students also need to be around students of varying abilities (Mitchell, 2015); however, the learning rates and needs of students can be vastly different, which changes the learning environment (Naraian, 2011). Student placements should be determined based on both social and academic needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), but knowing which one to choose as the priority can be difficult (Ruppar et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2015).

Special education students placed in general education secondary classrooms are not very successful in terms of academic achievements (Fuchs et al., 2015). The behaviors of students with special needs can create distractions in the classroom, which may hinder everyone’s learning (Mattison, 2011; Mattison & Blader, 2013; Lochman et al., 2012). According to LRE and FAPE policies, and IDEA, all students should be educated with their non-disabled peers as much as possible, unless there are specific circumstances not to, whether academic or behavioral (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; 2004). The school district and IEP committee still have the responsibility of educating everyone in the best environment possible. A continuum of alternative placements includes all levels of special education programming, which consists of general education classes, inclusion support, co-teaching, resource classes, self-contained
classes, adaptive behavior classes, and special schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Using inclusion as the only option, the purpose of special education is undermined and no longer offers anything ‘special’ and, in fact, is doing a disservice to those students that truly need specialized instruction (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011).

**Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

**Setting options for students with disabilities.** As mentioned earlier, choosing the setting in which students will be educated is a contentious topic and the different views have been simplified into two categories: general setting or special setting. Regardless of the setting, to meet the needs of special education students requires different teaching techniques because what works for everyone else, is not working for these students (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Whether this can be achieved in an inclusive classroom or should be in a separate setting is still up for debate. Various studies have been completed and the results from these compiled here to help determine what the best setting is. Before the FAPE and LRE laws were established, students that displayed distinct differences were immediately segregated. Therefore, the research discussion below begins with this method of segregation, and then progresses to the research that supports inclusion.

*Special settings including resource and self-contained.* Even after decades of research studies that support inclusion, there are still studies that believe separate special education settings are more beneficial to some students. A study by Fuchs et al. (2015) states that students with learning disabilities have not shown improvement through inclusion and educational levels are still very low. In this study, one group received specialized instruction and interventions, and the other group received general instruction and interventions. Post-test data indicated that students receiving separate, targeted interventions were more successful in every area as opposed
to the students in inclusive settings and the data was the same from year-to-year (Fuchs et al., 2015).

Although inclusion activists argue that there are social needs, as well as access to general curriculum needs, that can only be met in the general education classroom, there is also research to support that separate settings result in benefits related to social needs and academic achievements (Eller et al., 2016). Whether academic success is the goal or not, behavior is sometimes difficult to separate from the equation. Studies by Mattison (2011) and Mattison and Blader (2013) conclude that specialized settings are necessary to adequately address the behavioral needs of some students simply because general education teachers are not trained and equipped to handle the behaviors.

**Full inclusion and inclusion with specialized supports.** There are many advocates of full inclusion/mainstreaming for all students. This group of researchers believes that the law of LRE was made in the best interest of the child and should be followed and implies that a continuum of services is the opposite of inclusion. Kurth (2015) and McLeskey and Waldron (2011a) state that although districts are increasing the number of students with disabilities that attend general education classes, the level of disability has an effect because students with more significant disabilities are still being excluded from general education settings.

Basically, there are two main groups: one that includes full inclusion and the other that includes partial inclusion. However, both groups realize that special education students must have some type of specialized support whatever the setting. The current debate is regarding how much support is provided within the general education classroom before the classroom is considered a separate setting. When looking at appropriate settings, it is important to note that the pull-out method and resource setting are essentially different aspects of the same thing. The
resource setting generally refers to a separate classroom; however, when a student is removed from the general education classroom for any amount of time, also known as a pull-out, this is considered a specialized (i.e., separate, setting) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

One alternative to the resource or pull-out methods is the co-teaching option. There has been a lot of research on the benefits of various co-teaching models; however, the data does not show any satisfactory academic improvement obtained from these models. The co-teacher does not usually teach new material and very rarely instructs over the material (Zigmond et al., 2009). Co-teachers are there to offer more intentional support such as keeping students on task to complete their work and perhaps monitoring the work itself (Zigmond et al., 2009). For co-teaching to be successful, there must be collaboration between the general education teacher and the special education teacher, (i.e., the arrangement must be more than just an additional adult in the room) (Murawski, 2012). Mitchell (2015) determined that students with mild learning disabilities were able to progress in an inclusive setting with co-teaching support. The author studied the academic levels of students with learning disabilities in math and reading and, as the students got older, these academic difficulties were less significant (Mitchell, 2015).

Another argument for the increase of inclusive settings is the AGC. Unfortunately, in special settings, the amount of AGC is reduced dramatically and the difficulty seems to grow each year, which increases the learning gaps. Lee et al. (2010) found that special education students in inclusive settings worked on the same level of tasks approximately 90% of the time; however, those in a full special education setting worked on standard level tasks only approximately 50% of the time.

These results indicate that full inclusion may be better for students to access grade level curriculum; however, the data shows the importance of using specialized supports within the
inclusive settings to increase the academic success of special education students. Studies have shown that implementing modifications to assignments resulted in an increase in student engagement, a decrease in competitive behavior, and a decrease in instances where teachers had to employ classroom management strategies (Lee et al., 2010). Ruppar (2015) demonstrated that when students with severe literacy disabilities were placed into special education classes, there was limited active engagement and students were passively engaged in activities. Many low-level materials such as worksheets and pictures were used in the special education classes; therefore, activities were not a natural representation of the required skills. Ruppar (2015) advocates that if students in special settings are not provided with the same level of material to increase literacy skills, then students with special needs must be included in general education classes to have exposure to grade level materials.

The same conclusions have been made by researchers who have focused on specific criteria, including elementary (McLeskey et al., 2012; Tremblay, 2013), secondary (Hang & Rabren, 2009; Lyons et al., 2016), subject specific (Fuchs et al., 2015; Ruppar, 2015; Tremblay, 2013,), or disability specific (Browder, 2009; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Doyle & Giangreco, 2013; Kleinert et al., 2015; Lyons et al., 2016; Mattison, 2011). The results all show that special education students perform better in inclusive classes rather than being segregated in special classes. However, the concern is still that the level of academic success is not evident.

**Continuum of services.** Making a choice between those two settings is not the aim of most researchers, who prefer a compromise, (i.e., to provide a continuum of services) (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Ford, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011a). Such a continuum requires an individual process to place students in the LRE for their needs; therefore, having a variety of options has been shown to be the most beneficial (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
Limiting the type and number of settings that a district can provide creates a void when trying to find the best setting for a student. McLeskey and Waldron (2011a) have studied inclusion over the past several years, specifically with elementary aged students, and their research has shown that some students with learning disabilities make academic progress. However, this study also indicated that even when extensive development or refinement of programs occurred, academic achievement for most students did not increase (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011a). Another study that showed mixed results with inclusion is the study by Ford (2013) that looked at learning disabilities where students required more specialized instruction in various settings such as individually, partner pairs, and small groups, in addition to the whole group. The result from this study was that struggling students had to be taught separately for targeted instruction. Given the research, the question remains as to how instructional needs for students with learning disabilities are being met in full inclusion settings (Ford, 2013). Confirmation was made when another study looked at intellectual disabilities and students with low-level academic skills, which stated that “if students are at a place where they need to be learning different things, it is necessary that they be educated in a separate environment” (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011, p. 63).

**Additional factors related to why and how students are placed.** Simply knowing the options for placement is not enough when trying to determine what is best for students with special needs. There have been supplementary factors uncovered in the research that affect both how and why placements are made. Many studies target inclusion as a solution to the special education problem, yet educators remain challenged with determining which inclusion services best meet the needs of students with disabilities to influence both academic and social achievement (Zigmond et al., 2009).
**Type of disabilities.** Usually the more severe the disability, or the more disruptive, the more the student is separated and placed into a special setting, presumably to work on those issues with a qualified professional (Mattison, 2011). There have been several studies that look at one or more types of disability to determine how these students are being educated. Autism is studied quite frequently, seemingly due to the social incompetence associated with the disorder. Kurth (2015) studied autism settings to try and determine what other factors influenced placement decisions. Feldman et al. (2016) studied autism but also included intellectual disabilities to see how often students with these disabilities are placed into general settings and if all students interacted with each other. Eller et al. (2016) also studied behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, and emotional disorders. These authors support the assertion that students with these disorders should be placed into specialized settings to have proper support for their behaviors since general education teachers rarely have training in those areas.

Browder et al. (2009) completed a literature review of national reports showing the reading statistics of students with intellectual disabilities. These authors determined that there was a lack of evidence to support how to increase the literacy in current educational situations. They found that severely disabled students are being placed into special settings and being taught functional sight words instead of actual literacy. The researchers decided to create a literacy model to address the needs of students with intellectual disabilities and to increase literacy skills. This study implied that students with these types of disabilities are being separated and not given the same opportunities to learn literacy as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, it is important to create a conceptual model that helps teach other foundations for literacy for all students including those with severe disabilities.
Societal ideology. There is research to support the suggestion that the placement of students with special needs is based on the ideas and interpretations of society. In a comparative analysis of four education systems in England, Finland, Ireland, and Norway, Arduin (2015) studied what the societal reasons are for why inclusion is not implemented more often. The primary purpose was to recognize the issues in education that prohibit the assurance of placements in an inclusion setting for all students with disabilities. Most countries want to educate students in an inclusive environment but do not understand the needs of students to make academic progress (Arduin, 2015). There is ongoing debate about what defines special education, which in turn causes confusion about the actual needs of special education students. Arduin (2015) mentioned the push of western society to move forward with inclusion for various reasons including socialization, and the two questions of where and how children should be educated were considered to see what the connection was between inclusion and special education. This study looked at the relationship between society’s ideology and its approach to inclusion and found that influences from the legal system, social beliefs, policies, financial restraints, and the environment all influenced how educational systems are organized and operated. The underlying expectation of society is that students with special needs have always been separated, and many countries are trying to change that view by increasing inclusion without a complete understanding of special education and its relationship to inclusion (Arduin, 2015). Therefore, it is unlikely that successful inclusion will be realized by everyone anytime soon.

Tomlinson (2015) undertook a large sociological study of various educational systems worldwide to investigate and contrast the thoughts and practices for inclusion by those within these systems. Tomlinson (2015) was primarily looking at comparisons between England and
the United States where there is a push for students with disabilities to learn skills that transfer into success in society such as obtaining a job. The study found that participants believed students should be prepared for employment regardless of the students’ disabilities to contribute to the status of the countries in the global economy. The skills needed for success after graduation should begin in school and, if students are never integrated, then they are not given a chance to learn at normal levels to then be productive members of society. It is imperative that students with disabilities obtain training that provides skills sought after by employers (Tomlinson, 2015).

Many factors influence decisions about the LRE and how individual students access the general curriculum, specifically those with significant disabilities. Ruppar et al. (2016) gathered information about local and national data trends to create a framework for ecological factors and to examine obstacles faced by students attempting to access the curriculum. The purpose of this study was to improve access for students with significant disabilities. The study does not offer solutions but rather highlights various struggles within inclusion and other special education settings. A few of the concerns were that many placement decisions were made based on student characteristics, teacher effectiveness and decisions, policies, administrative structures, and assumptions that placements cannot be changed over time (Ruppar et al., 2016). These factors create barriers that determine the content and context in which students are being educated, so by understanding the implications, better decisions can be made to prevent further assumptions about students with disabilities (Ruppar et al., 2016).

Wilson et al. (2011) studied the factors used to determine the classroom placement of students with disabilities and found no difference in grades based on settings. Thus, these authors wanted to determine what factors were most important for determining placement and
looked at several previous studies and how placement related to government law. The focus was on secondary students owing to the lack of data for this age level. Various characteristics were found, so they limited the research to four areas including setting. “(i.e., coteaching class, resource room, alternate day support program, no direct services)” (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 150), intellectual ability, related services and testing accommodations, and content area performance. The co-teaching setting was researched thoroughly to determine whether this was a better option than separate classes. Co-teaching has primarily been viewed as an option for a less restrictive setting; however, when a special education teacher in inclusion is increasingly accessible, the co-teaching environment is no longer considered least restrictive. Data indicated that the population of secondary students studied received support from special education teachers in three to four classes each day (Wilson et al., 2011). An additional correlation of interest was connected to state assessments, which found that the more time a student spent in special settings or received direct support, the more testing accommodations they received (Wilson et al., 2011). Data was collected for each content area; however, there was little difference between academic performances across placement settings in the content areas studied, except in science (Wilson et al., 2011). The most progress in science was made in separate settings, even when compared to co-teaching. There appeared to be less collaboration regarding special education programming and planning at the secondary level, and intelligence scores also appeared indicative of placement. The authors clarified that special education was a service, not a place, and the lack of real academic success was indicative of the problems with how to determine the services required (Wilson et al., 2011).

**Funding.** Banks et al. (2015) conducted a study in Ireland using the National Survey of Schools database to gather information about how funding may influence the placement of
special education students. There is increased emphasis on inclusive education; however, there is little agreement about the best way to support students with special needs in mainstream schools (Banks et al., 2015). The increase of inclusion requires a look at current funding to determine another model for using these funds. Special education funding is being used but not in an appropriate manner to improve education; therefore, the allocation of special education funding needs to be differentiated and put to better use with a proposed model to address this need (Banks et al., 2015).

Kurth (2015) conducted a study primarily on how students with autism are placed in educational environments. Using public data, the author compared various states within the United States and found that various factors were used for educational placement decisions, many of which had nothing to do with the student. Many states have different rules for placement, and the options used were inclusive, mainstream, self-contained, a separate school, residential, and home placement (Kurth, 2015). Additional factors affecting educational placement included funding and family preferences, as well as the student’s disability including the level of severity. Interpretation of the public data indicated that most states did not provide access to inclusion in the general education classroom for students with autism spectrum disorders for the majority of the instructional day. This information highlighted the importance of focusing on how to meet the needs and ensure the success of students with autism in inclusive classrooms (Kurth, 2015) but does not include academic data to verify or deny the success of inclusion.

Behavior. Mattison (2011) looked at two different placements of middle school students who were eligible for special education services based on an emotional disturbance qualification. One group of students was in a self-contained class and the other was in a separate self-contained
school. The purpose was to determine which setting provided the most gains regarding behavior and academic achievement. The author collected data by direct observation and saw improvements in behavior but not in academics. The academic standing of the self-contained class group was slightly worse than that of the separate self-contained school group, and no change in academics was reported in the self-contained school group; whereas the behavior of the self-contained school group improved more than that of the self-contained class group (Mattison, 2011). Mattison and Blader (2013) addressed students with behavioral disorders and included academic success as an area of study. These authors wanted to determine what exact effect behavioral and emotional issues had on academic achievement. One major limitation of this study was that the 196 students studied were all in a self-contained setting and the study did not include data to compare students in a general setting with or without inclusion (Mattison & Blader, 2013). Lyons et al. (2016) studied what the most critical social and behavioral needs of students in high school were. The study consisted of 137 students with severe disabilities that were enrolled in at least one general education class. These authors provided recommendations for assessing an intervention to increase social competence within general education classrooms; however, academic achievement was not taken into account (Lyons et al., 2016).

**Lack of training.** There is a significant amount of research that has been completed on the effectiveness of inclusion with emphasis on the co-teaching option. A similar consensus for all the studies supports the need for increased training on how to use co-teaching appropriately to limit there simply being a second teacher in the room (Wilson et al., 2011; Zigmond et al., 2009). Additional research on which setting students with disabilities should be educated in concluded that if inclusion is to work, then the answer is to provide more teacher training, not only to special educators but also to general educators (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). The many challenges
that general educators face when trying to provide individualized support to special education students, while still ensuring all other students are learning, have been explored, as well as the idea that all students would benefit from inclusion if undertaken properly (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

In a literature review by Mintz and Wyse (2015), tension was discovered between knowing what to do regarding special education and doing so based on the required pedagogy. The teacher plays a huge role in determining what to do in meeting the needs of special education students within the classroom. Special educators have knowledge that directs them on how to handle special needs; however, general educators do not receive the same training as that of the special educators (Mintz & Wyse, 2015). If this is a type of distinct pedagogy, then general educators should be given the same training since inclusion is an enduring concept. If this is not a pedagogy specifically, then there is data to support the need for its creation. There is a huge difference between knowledge of how to serve special education versus doing so; therefore, it is “recommended that SEN [Special Education Needs] training should become a core, compulsory part of the initial teacher training for all teachers” (Mintz & Wyse, 2015, p. 1169).

Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattey, and Raley (2016) determined that for inclusion to work, there needs to be a better training model. The study described one model used and suggested that the model allowed teachers and paraprofessionals to use peer support to increase access to the curriculum as well as increasing interaction between students with and without disabilities. The focus was on students with severe disabilities within the general education environment, and the study looked primarily at social outcomes (Brock et al., 2016). However, the study was limited to the number of participants and the type of disability. Data indicating academic
progress or lack thereof were not included; nevertheless, research indicated that three-fourths of the identified students experienced significant growth towards meeting goals contained in the individualized education plans that focused on social progress (Brock et al., 2016). The researchers showed through qualitative data collection that paraprofessionals did not encourage social interactions in the general education classroom; however, after training, they were more likely to do so, which directly increased social progress among special education students. With teacher training, both teachers and paraprofessionals helped improve the social outcomes of students. Some limitations explored included the requirement for more individualized training for higher need students (Brock et al., 2016).

**Review of Methodological Issues**

Completing a thorough literature review leads to designing a well-rounded research methodology to fit the purpose of the study. Descriptive, correlational, and experimental research designs are a few of the main categories of research that could apply to any study. Therefore, the overall goal of the research must be determined to establish the best method for producing the desired results. Some considerations are to decide whether the research provides additional information, determines the relationship between two or more variables, or whether a cause-and-effect relationship exists (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). In the education field, each of the various methods [descriptive, correlational and experimental] of research can be found. Determining the best option depends on the outcome the researcher wants. If specific, individual characteristics of the participants will influence the outcomes, then a qualitative measure may be more beneficial. However, if there is a specific variable that can be manipulated and data gathered, then quantitative studies may be more beneficial. In the present study, the types of setting was the variable being researched even though there were many other characteristics
involved including type of disability, level of disability, funding, or other ecological factors. Because none of the additional characteristics were manipulated in any way, these characteristics were not classified as variables relating to the outcomes. However, it is still important to the body of research to discuss these characteristics to understand the influence of individual factors and the effects on a group of subjects. The following groups of studies suggest that both qualitative and quantitative studies are necessary to obtain a complete view of a situation.

**Quantitative research methods.** The literature review revealed several studies that used quantitative measures to discover whether inclusion settings were better for special education students or not, which used statistical formulas. Actual experimental analyses supporting inclusion were completed by Hang and Rabren (2009) and Tremblay (2013). Descriptive and correlational analyses using surveys were performed by Lyons et al. (2016) and Kleinert et al. (2015) by undertaking various quantitative measures. A longitudinal study was completed by Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, and Theoharis (2013), which found a positive correlation between the amount of time spent in general education and academic achievement. Additionally, on the side of inclusion was one study that used both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Mattison, 2011).

On the other side of the debate, a recent study focused on quantitative statistical analysis and determined that specialized settings were more effective than general education settings. Fuchs et al. (2015) observed fourth graders learning fractions in both general and special settings over the course of three years. The three randomized control trials determined that students learned more in the special instructional setting than in the general setting.

Two quantitative studies collected public data that showed that various factors played a role in determining which settings students should be educated in (McLeskey et al., 2012; Banks
et al., 2015). McLeskey et al. (2012) collated state numbers to see how many students were being served in general education versus special settings and revealed an overall increase in inclusion, but they did not address academic improvements. The study by Banks et al. (2015) highlighted funding as a determination of where students were placed and showed an increase in inclusion; however, did not provide recommendations for which setting was more effective.

**Qualitative research methods.** At first glance, the methodology used in the majority of previous research is qualitative owing to the individual nature of each student’s needs, even when diagnosed with the same disability. One of the drawbacks of qualitative methods is that the results are difficult to generalize to a larger group of students (Creswell, 2013). When determining which setting was most beneficial for special education students, 13 distinct studies reported for inclusion and could be classified as qualitative. Studies by Lee et al. (2010), McLeskey et al. (2012), and Ruppar (2015) used various methods of case studies, direct observation, and surveys. The studies with the most general information supporting inclusion were qualitative comparative analyses called a meta-synthesis of previous data, including those by Browder et al. (2009), Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011), Doyle and Giangreco (2013), and Mitchell (2015). Each study stated that students with special needs were better served in an inclusive setting.

Qualitative studies in support of placing special education students in a specialized setting such as the resource setting were completed by comparative analysis of literature reviews by Ford (2013) and Eller et al. (2016). They determined that students with special needs learned better when in special education settings with trained teachers. Much of the research was not conclusive in determining which setting the authors found to be more effective; however, many additional factors such as staffing concerns, training needs, student relationships, and minimizing
conflicts were found to have some effect. Several comparative analyses that discussed these factors were undertaken by Wilson et al. (2011), McLeskey et al. (2012), Mintz and Wyse (2015), Arduin (2015), Kurth (2015), Tomlinson (2015), Ruppar et al. (2016), and Brock et al. (2016). Each study included one or more of the additional factors above, highlighting the difficulty in determining the most appropriate setting for students with special needs. To determine an exact correlation, each of the additional factors would need to be removed from the situation, which may not be possible. One last recurring theme found in the literature was the many observational qualitative studies undertaken in the co-teaching environment. These studies looked at the effectiveness of co-teaching and the teachers themselves, but rarely compared them within other settings. The overall conclusions drawn were that co-teaching was not being performed effectively since the general educator performs all teaching while the special education teacher only assists (Hyatt & Filler, 2011; Scanlon & Baker, 2012). The information is abundant when determining that teachers are not being used effectively in these settings; however, the data does not help to understand what is effective. The limited interactions and specially designed instruction are not helpful if there are no outcomes to use for comparisons. Until academic progress can be determined based on instructional setting, these studies do not show which setting is more beneficial for special education students.

**Synthesis of Research Findings**

The current research base that looks at which setting is more appropriate for students with disabilities shows that there are many additional variables and factors that apply when deciding between specialized and inclusive settings. The majority of the research uses qualitative methods, which include additional aspects, such as socialization and behavior as reasons for inclusion. Although there are a few quantitative studies, these are limited in scope or do not use
the appropriate measures that can be generalized. The additional confounding variables in both types of research are the type of disability (Browder et al., 2009), sociological ideas (Arduin, 2015), funding constraints (Banks et al., 2015), behavior concerns (Mattison, 2011), and lack of training (Mintz & Wyse, 2015). Some of the limitations include specifiers of grade levels (Tomlinson, 2015), subject areas (Kleinert et al., 2015), type of inclusion support (Ford, 2013), and numbers of participants (Tremblay, 2013). The data may be comprehensive in one area but lacking in another and there does not seem to be very many studies that are unique to type of setting and academics only.

Many education rules and interpretations do not require general education teachers to receive the same level of training as special education teachers (Naraian, 2011). When special education students are placed in general education classrooms, many factors can interfere with academic progress, including the socialization skills and behavior of the special education students (Mattison, 2011). When teachers are not equipped to handle such situations, not only is a special education student not learning, but many of the other non-disabled students are also not learning (Mattison & Blader, 2013). The argument here is that full inclusion without offering a continuum of services as specified in IDEA law is a disservice to the academic needs of students with special needs (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). The special education program loses its purpose when certified teachers do not use their skills (Zigmond et al., 2009).

One suggestion to address the issues associated with students with special needs in general classrooms is the use of co-teaching. There are several options for how a general education teacher and a special education teacher should collaborate and teach a group of students together (Murawski, 2012). With the increase of the expectation of differentiation, there continues to be challenges with the inclusive teaching environment (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).
co-teaching setting might appear like a great compromise; however, research indicates that students still do not obtain the full benefits of specialized instruction (Eller et al., 2016). Currently, research does not indicate that co-teaching should be labeled as best practice, even though co-teaching is beneficial in some cases (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011b).

In recent years, another solution has been to apply the pull-out method. This method is where a student is assigned to a general education classroom, but a special education person periodically removes them (pulls them out) from the classroom to provide specialized instruction (Ford, 2013). A pull-out provides special educators with the opportunity to address concepts or topics that special education students may need more time understanding. “In some situations it may be best for students with ld [learning disability] to be taught in separate pull out classrooms with a teacher who can provide targeted skill instruction in areas where a student is struggling” (Ford, 2013, p. 15). One concern is that a pull-out creates an environment that is no longer inclusive and students are being segregated and noticeably being removed from a general education classroom (Ford, 2013). In addition, the time the students are pulled out from the general classroom equates to more time where the special education students are missing out on instruction from the general education teacher (Ford, 2013). Some of the data shows limited academic progress, but based on the changes in delivery and laws, the actual progress can be misleading when the best option differs from study to study (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011a).

One reason to support special settings is that the general education teacher is kept on a strict schedule and must get through a certain amount of material in a certain amount of time (Naraian, 2011). Unfortunately, special education students who clearly learn at a much slower pace in areas such as reading are not able to grasp much of the information at the required speed (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). When this occurs, students might be placed in a resource setting, a
class that is taught by a certified special educator, or an alternative, separate class setting, also taught by a special educator, both of which are allowed as part of the continuum of alternative placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Once again, there is varying research that both supports and disagrees with the success of such settings.

In contrast, the studies that favor inclusion still have not answered how effective these inclusive settings are for students who may require a more structured, separate setting to meet their academic needs. There are students in special education because there is a documented eligibility and need for specialized instruction, including individual student testing and evaluations that support the fact that these students need specialized environments and instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). However, if all special education students are placed in a self-contained, secluded environment, these students will not learn how to interact in public with non-disabled persons (Naraian, 2011).

Academic progress and success remain the primary goal of a school district; therefore, it makes sense to find the best environment for all students. The problem remains that research shows many reasons for increased socialization through inclusion; however, there is minimal data to support inclusion for academic reasons. Even though students with special needs obviously require specialized instruction, districts continue to suggest inclusion as the best option. Districts are making decisions without possessing the essential data to determine which placements might be the best, based on academic progress. One suggestion is for districts to have a program that offers the entire range of service settings described in IDEA (2004) and to ensure IEPs are truly individualized based on student need, not administrative convenience (Hyatt & Filler, 2011; Kleinert et al., 2015). Decisions as to the best settings for students with special needs to obtain academic success are better supported by both qualitative and quantitative
data. Collecting qualitative data from professionals that have worked with students in both
general education classrooms and specialized settings provides deeper and richer information to
lay a foundation for more generalized quantitative data in future research.

**Critique of Previous Research**

The majority of previous data do not cover the specific question of which setting
improves academic success. In the research that does address academic measures, little
improvement between the settings was found (Fore, Hagan-Burke, Boon, & Smith, 2008). One
problem could be that special education is a broad topic and therefore is very difficult to
generalize the results from different studies based on the various categories. There are studies
specific to one disability area such as autism (Kurth, 2015), emotional disorders (Mattison &
Blader, 2013), intellectual disabilities (Browder et al., 2009) or learning disabilities (Fuchs et al.,
2015); however, there are limited studies that remove the labels and that research placement and
academics only. One major problem is that behavioral factors are a huge aspect of many
disabilities and, if certain disruptive behavior is the reason behind why students are being
removed from the general education setting, then academics will undoubtedly suffer (Lee et al.,
2010; Mattison, 2011). Socialization is also an area of concern and is mentioned in much of the
research reviewed (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011). When students are placed
based on socialization needs, academic needs are hard to measure. The curriculum in a general
education classroom is at grade level and some students with special needs may not be at that
level; therefore, these students require specialized instruction (U.S. Department of Education,
2006). Unfortunately, some disabilities do not lend well to students that require grade level
instruction, yet behaviors are keeping them separated from the general classroom (Mattison,
2011). Special education teachers are not always qualified to teach grade level materials, and thus the academic gaps increase when students are separated (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

There is not enough data to support that the academic needs of students with special needs are being met in general education settings. Secondary level classrooms must ensure that all students take courses for graduation and access the general curriculum to take end-of-course exams (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). Unless a student with special needs qualifies to take an alternative assessment, the student is expected to learn the same material as all other students (Fore et al., 2008). The IEP committee can determine whether passing is required or not; however, that is the expectation for all students. When a student with special needs has modifications that change the level of what they are learning, the option to participate only is considered. For special education students requiring only accommodations, the passing standard is expected (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Generally, the full range of curriculum is not taught in a special education setting (Fore et al., 2008). More data collection on the effectiveness of each setting for students with modifications to the curriculum is required to determine success rates on state exams. The data shows that, socially, students with special needs gain benefit from attending general education classes (Carter et al., 2011); however, academically there is not enough data to support one setting over the other. School districts need to know which options are more appropriate. A student on a modified curriculum may not be required to learn the entire range of subjects (ESC 18, 2016), yet the student must be provided with the opportunity to undertake the state exams. If the determination is made that a special setting, such as a resource class, is a better placement for students with special needs, then the next problem of how students are being taught in such a resource setting should be addressed (Kleinert et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2015). Special education teachers and general education teachers need more training.
and the ability to work together to ensure the material is being covered, regardless of the setting (Zigmond et al., 2009). A specialized instruction piece is required, and special education teachers should be able to collaborate with general education teachers for such a curriculum piece (Zigmond et al., 2009). For the students that do need to be included in general education classes for all subjects, general education teachers should have additional training on how to provide accommodations for these students with special needs (Lee et al., 2010; Scanlon & Baker, 2012). Within the research reviewed, there was no evidence as to which setting showed more academic progress for students with disabilities.

Based on this literature review, which developed a unique conceptual framework using legal requirements, various interpretations, and measurable data to understand what could assist the influence of special education, there is sufficient reason to think that an investigation examining the influence of decision-making will yield important findings. I can, therefore, claim that the literature review provided strong support for pursuing a research project to answer the following multi-part research question: What is the nature of making special education decisions, how do the various factors and limitations influence results, and what are the effects of setting on academic progress?

Summary

Whereas some people think special education students need to stay in special education classes, educators should determine where a student learns more, not where behaviors are best, given that current research supports inclusion for behavior but not academics, and LRE depends on a continuum of alternative placements that monitors many factors (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
There are two main contentions for how special education students should be educated. The first is that special education students should be educated in an inclusive environment with other students including those that are not disabled (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). The second contention is that special education students should stay in special settings (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). The purpose of inclusion is that all students must have AGC and must receive a FAPE just like any other student regardless of their disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Another reason is that all students need to be educated with their non-disabled peers to increase social skills and monitor behaviors (Carter et al., 2011; Naraiyan, 2011). When special education students are placed in the general education classroom, it is more difficult for the students to receive specialized instruction (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). On the other hand, it is important to provide the LRE in which the students can be taught. The purpose of specialized settings is to facilitate students with disabilities who are academically behind or below grade level being provided with specialized instruction to address academic needs (Lee et al., 2010). Sometimes, special education students have various behavioral needs that interfere in the general education classroom; therefore, when the student’s disability requires more behavioral support, a separate setting is needed. The concern is that students receiving specialized instruction in a separate setting are not able to experience general education and their LRE becomes a segregated special setting for reasons other than academics (Zigmond et al., 2009). Neither of these two arguments is ideal for all students with special needs and the continuum of service options are necessary for all campuses. These service options include mainstream or full inclusion, co-teaching, in-class support, resource or pull-out, self-contained classes, or self-contained separate campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). When dealing with students with special needs, there are many factors to consider in addition to the
type of disability; therefore, it is difficult to generalize which setting is best for all students with special needs. By looking at academic progress alone, it is helpful for determining which setting is best for educational purposes by separating behavior and other factors from the equation. Once the academic needs are being met in the LRE, the other factors become secondary and can be addressed separately.

**Study Implications**

Further research in the areas of special education, specifically related to LRE and academic success, will allow educators to know where to start when making decisions and to continue to answer the question—*Do resource or other special education classes, which limit the inclusive environments of students, benefit or hinder academic progress?* The decision behind which setting to place students with special needs is often arbitrary, based on what the parents and students want, or even on administrative convenience owing to staffing limitations.

Qualitative data obtained from a variety of professionals who have experience with students in both settings, (i.e., general education inclusion and special education resource, can help guide the process to determine placement for students with special needs). After all, the people involved in the day-to-day education of students best understand how someone with special needs will benefit in one environment over the other.

Qualitative data alone may not be sufficient to completely understand the advantages and disadvantages of which setting a student with special needs should be placed. A complementary future research study would be to gather state assessment scores as quantitative data. The scores could be obtained from when students were in a resource setting as well as when those same students were in a general education classroom setting. Gathering such data, obtained from both settings, would be a start in determining the academic successes in each setting. If desired, an
even more specific set of quantitative data would be classroom achievement scores. As with any study, there must be guidelines that inherently limit the results and the research must start somewhere.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine teacher perceptions to determine whether special education students should be educated in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes. The objective was to discover educator perceptions and experiences of teaching secondary students with disabilities in general education and special education settings, then to compare these perceptions to academic expectations by exploring themes and patterns derived from the data. The data facilitated a better understanding of programming and placement decisions that met the academic needs of special education students. Students in special education programs are already at a disadvantage to other students based on their learning differences and associated challenges. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) realized that some students learn differently than others and allowed school districts to determine in which setting a student with special needs learns best. However, problems occurred when the student’s progress was unable to be monitored in both settings that would have assisted in making placement decisions. There were basic guidelines that were followed, but individual students required different things from their environment. One student with special needs may be successful with no support in a general education classroom, whereas another might require a special education teacher to help with comprehension of material, and yet another might not be able to function in a general education classroom at all (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Ford, 2013). It is important to use valid reasoning when placing students in the appropriate learning environment. Special education needs are academic, social, and behavioral (Hyatt & Filler, 2011), so knowing which criteria should be used first in decision-making is essential. Inclusion is a way for special education students to remain in a general education classroom; however, general education teachers are not always trained to provide
specialized instruction (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). That responsibility falls to the special education teacher, yet that is difficult when they are not in the classroom all the time.

**Research Questions**

The present study was guided by several research questions, which evolved over the course of the literature review and inquiry process (Agee, 2009). The central question was: Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? The subsequent research questions were:

Q1. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting?

Q2. What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful?

Q3. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

Identifying the typical responses and views of educators can help guide districts to indicate appropriate criteria for deciding the best option for providing academic placements for students with special needs.

Current practices suggest that determining the placement of students with special needs can be achieved using a variety of factors as described in the Chapter 2 literature review. However, the main goal of education is academic success; therefore, turning theory into action with the present research study further increases the accessible data available for informed decision-making. The teachers interviewed offered valuable information directly related to
academic gains and losses in each setting. The views and perceptions obtained from the interviews directed placements for academic success. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology performed to conduct the study using phenomenological concepts, and includes information on why a phenomenological case study was chosen and how the population, sampling, procedures for data collection, and rationale for a qualitative research design were used. Specific data analysis procedures and discussions of validity and reliability are included, and the chapter closes by summarizing the method.

**Purpose and Design of the Study**

**Qualitative method.** Qualitative research methods can be explained in various ways, depending on the viewpoint of the researcher. When choosing common characteristics that are most important, the first characteristic that separates qualitative methods from quantitative methods is that the research is completed in a natural setting. To justify that the design is qualitative, the lack of a formal structure is a key component and the design may be fluid or changing (Creswell, 2013). When using a natural setting, it is understood that some things may change based on the people or surroundings near the participants in the study. As the research progresses, the overall design should progress as well, to include any updates or changes (Creswell, 2013). Adams and Lawrence (2015) stated that “qualitative analysis allows a researcher to sort and summarize data from qualitative measures such as interviews, narrative observations, and open-ended responses on a questionnaire” (p. 140). One gray area is the difference between qualitative and descriptive, “qualitative analysis is used exclusively with qualitative measures, whereas descriptive statistics can be used to analyze data from both qualitative and quantitative measures” (Adam & Lawrence, 2015, p. 140). Research indicates that quantitative data is helpful as a second step in a comprehensive research methodology to
determine specific relationships among variables such as grades. Stake (2010) suggested that a qualitative study was most valid when the main research instrument was the researcher. A qualitative study is an important first step in the data collection process and because teachers are on the frontline, they have firsthand knowledge of student success within their classrooms. These shared experiences among both special education and general education teachers allow a deeper understanding of how settings affect the academic progress for special education students (Creswell, 2013).

**Phenomenological case study.** Qualitative research methods are further broken down into ways of gathering data including narrative study, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography, and the case study (Creswell, 2013). Out of these choices, the case study is the preferred method. According to Yin (2014), a case study design should be considered when it is difficult to separate the experience from the reason that the phenomenon exists, (e.g., when the behavior or the situation cannot be changed and the conditions are just as important to the study as the results). The study becomes more about how or why, rather than what, and it is either not possible or simply unethical to manipulate the variables that are being studied. It would have been impossible to have a true picture of special education placement and decision-making without considering the context within which these factors occurred (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

There are several types of case studies including an individual case study of one subject, a single case study of multiple participants sharing the experience, or a descriptive case study that is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2014). Since the present study involved multiple teachers that shared certain characteristics and a shared experience or phenomenon, a phenomenological case study was the most relevant. In a qualitative research method, the type of case study is dependent upon the
subjects and can be described using types of case studies as characteristics, meaning the research can include a narrative, ethnography, or phenomenon. Phenomenology is a shared concept or cultural phenomenon that is meant to describe, not to explain or analyze, and is an exploration of a group of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, phenomenology has characteristics including transcendental or psychological phenomenology that focus on the descriptions provided by the subjects rather than on the interpretation of the data (Yin, 2014). The intent is to gain insight and understanding of a situation or phenomenon, in this case, the effects of settings on academic achievement of special education students.

Once it was determined that a phenomenological case study would be used, it was necessary to contain the information to remain focused on the necessary aspects specific to the study. This process is called binding and several researchers have provided suggestions on how to bind a case. These suggestions include by time and place (Creswell, 2013), by time and activity (Stake, 2010), and by definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because each teacher discussed their experiences and conclusions were drawn based on themes found in the opinions of many, their shared experiences elicited a phenomenon that could later be applied to future possibilities. The bounds explained by Stake (2010) suggested that time and activity were the criteria that held the case study together. In the present research, the relevant time was a period of three or more years, and the activity setting the district apart from others was that the district no longer offered the resource class setting as a placement option. By limiting the continuum of alternative placements (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), was there an effect on student performance within that district? The timeframe further binds the case because the district offered the specific setting of a resource class until a few years ago. Now, the only
options for special education students that were placed into a resource setting were to be placed into an inclusion class with special education support. The focus of the present phenomenological case study was to understand how the placement of students with disabilities affects academic success. My role was to interview educators and compile data for future educators to choose appropriate placements for students with disabilities. Further study is required on continued research of the LRE as it relates to social and academic benefits and challenges experienced by students with disabilities.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

The present phenomenological case study explored the lived experiences of 16 educators proficient in the knowledge of either special education or general education content areas. The participants were from a small rural district in southeast Texas who were questioned about their personal experiences of teaching students with special needs to obtain the participants’ professional opinions on which instructional setting was more effective for academic advancement. The population used in the research study was composed of teachers who were all employed by the district. Further criteria were used to narrow the population using a purposive sampling method (Palys, 2008), with the first characteristic required being teachers at the secondary level. The next criterion was length of employment, which was three years or longer. The group was then divided into two categories: general educators and special educators. The population was narrowed even further to consist of teachers that had experience working with special education students in either the resource setting or in the general education inclusion setting. Each general education teacher met the criteria of working with special education students in their classroom. Purposive sampling was used to determine which specific participants from the sample met the criteria (Palys, 2008). The sampling process was
undertaken by a face-to-face invitation asking the teachers that qualified with these criteria to be part of the actual study.

The number of participants was determined based on literature that used a similar study design (Creswell, 2013). In a school district with 1060 students and 65 teachers, including a third of the staff in the study was a good way to generalize an overall outcome. The idea was to interview teachers that had taught in the district long enough to experience working with students that had participated in both program options, and with turnover estimated at 30% per year in a district this size (NCES, 2016), 20 was a solid number to strive for with 16 being the actual sample size obtained. As presented below, there is existing research using qualitative methods where teachers have been asked to describe their teaching or perceptions about themselves in education; even though very few studies have focused on teachers’ opinions as related to student success. In 2009, a group of five researchers interviewed 35 educators to determine what criteria teachers required for inclusion to work for students with special needs (Kozik et al., 2009). Scanlon and Baker (2012) used the focus group method with 12 high school teachers to determine a teacher-created classroom model to provide accommodations to students. Grskovic and Trzcinka (2011) used the survey method where experienced special education teachers rated characteristics and recommendations necessary for general education teachers at the secondary level to be successful in teaching students with special needs. However, these studies gave little indication or teacher perspectives of academic success.

The data collected in the present study included personal-experience-information from the selected group of educators. The group consisted of both general education and special education teachers. The special education participants had experience working with special education students in either the resource setting or in the general education inclusion setting.
The general education participants had experience working with special education students in an inclusion setting, after the discontinuation of resource classes. The purpose was to determine the academic achievement results of each setting and the participants’ perceptions of student success.

**Instrumentation**

An initial invitation to participate in the study was given face-to-face with each teacher who had experience in either special education or general education content areas. The prospective list was compiled by myself based on certain criteria as follows: employed by the district for three years or more, general education teachers working with special education students in an inclusion setting, or special education teachers working with students in an inclusion setting or resource setting.

In the educational arena, qualitative research has only become popular within the last 30 years. Before that, quantitative experimentation was the preferred method. In a qualitative study, the interview process is the most commonly used data collection tool (Creswell, 2013). The practice of interviewing can be described as structured with closed-ended questions resembling a survey, unstructured, open-ended interviews, and many areas in between. A semi-structured interview, as well as a structured open-ended interview, can be used in phenomenological studies. Questions are focused but allow for plenty of elaboration and a subset of questions emerge based on previous responses (Seidman, 2006).

The subjects for the actual interview were chosen from those that agreed to take part in the present study. Once the participants were determined, individual interviews were scheduled. This phase consisted of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which used a guided question template and allowed for additional questions to form as the discussion progressed. Extreme
caution was given against using a strict interview guide to undertake an in-depth interview because thick, rich data was desired and was more likely to be obtained with open-ended questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There was no hypothesis to test; therefore, the questions were all aimed at gathering data, without a need to obtain certain results. It is acceptable and preferred that the researcher begins with specific questions and allows the rest of the questions to result from the interview itself. However, interview guides can be helpful, especially with people who have more difficulty talking about their experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Studies in social sciences often use the phenomenological interview approach. The questions themselves are crucial to this type of research. When dealing with thoughts, feelings, opinions, and specific experiences, open-ended questions are the best (Yin, 2014). It is up to the researcher to identify appropriate subjects or participants before the interview by making sure the potential participants have at least experienced the topic. Using the interview responses to analyze and show meaning to these lived experiences is imperative. The researcher should provide a non-threatening, friendly environment where the subjects can provide detailed explanations of these experiences (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2014).

My role in the present study was to compile the data so that current and future educators can use the information to choose appropriate settings for students with special needs. I am a special education teacher who has seen first-hand the effectiveness of each setting for students with special needs, and I might one day be able to make decisions for placement and therefore wanted to determine which setting was best for students of all ability levels. The current range of research does not include enough evidence of educator feedback. The opinions, thoughts, and feelings of the teachers who are working with students with special needs will improve the overall decision-making process for all students. The data collected from the interviews were
first placed into four different broad categories as follows: “successes in general education inclusion,” “successes in special education classes,” “challenges in general education inclusion,” and “challenges in special education classes.” Then, a detailed investigation and comparison of information was undertaken using a coding system to indicate additional themes and shared characteristics among the participants.

**Data Collection**

There has been a substantial amount of research undertaken to determine which classroom placement is the best option for students with special needs. Various forms of data collection have occurred in previous studies with the most abundant using observation (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2016; Fuchs et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2016; Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015; Ruppar, 2015) and surveys (Ford, 2013; Kleinert et al., 2015; Ruppar et al., 2016). Additional types of data collection included reflective questioning and interviews (Embury & Kroeger, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2012) and focus groups of educators (Berry, 2010; Kurz, Elliott, Wehby, & Smithson, 2010; Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

Data for the present research study were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews began with a series of guided questions that were asked of each interviewee and additional questions were generated throughout the course of each interview itself (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their perceptions, opinions, and understandings of personal experiences and observations of students’ academic success in both settings. This context utilized a phenomenology based on shared experiences of teachers (Creswell, 2013). The data collection process began with obtaining permission letters from the superintendent of the district, as well as the principal from the high school and the
principal from the middle school because the research only included secondary teachers. Teachers were identified using initial purposive selection criteria (Palys, 2008) and asked whether they were willing to answer questions related to their teaching experiences. Once verbal consent was obtained, the teachers signed a written consent form agreeing to participate in the study. Each interview was recorded and coded as necessary. I also composed field notes during each interview (Yin, 2014). Interviews allowed the teachers to tell their story and give their perception of how the different settings supported the students with special needs academically (Seidman, 2006). The teachers shared their experiences of working in a district that no longer offered the full range of instructional settings for students with special needs. These changes could have a positive or negative effect on student progress.

Some techniques were used before, during, and after the interview process to determine trustworthiness and credibility. During the development phase, I used the ‘interview the investigator’ method, where a role-play occurred to ensure that the questions were of high-quality criteria and sought the correct information (Chenail, 2011). This process was completed between myself and an uninvolved person to ensure the items were reliable from participant to participant, and that the questions reflected accurate information as well as limited researcher bias (Chenail, 2011). Using the semi-structured interview process allowed for specific data collection over the same areas with each participant and allowed time for me to ask follow-up questions before the end of the interview (Seidman, 2006). Letting the interview develop throughout the designated period can open the way for additional themes to emerge. One way to assure the accuracy of the information obtained is to use member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). During the interviews, I took written notes and used techniques of rewording, rephrasing, summarizing, and asking for clarification immediately following responses to ensure complete
understanding of all personal views. Each interview also ended with an open-ended question, which gave participants the opportunity to further explain or mention anything else that was not discussed or clarified to their liking. The process of reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and researcher reflection provided credibility to the study (Shenton, 2004). I bracketed myself from the study by explaining the experiences I have had with students in each setting. This can be found in the section discussing the role of the researcher (Chapter 4). It is acceptable for the researcher to be a part of the overall study, if there is no bias to the results gathered. See Appendices A and B For the complete list of interview questions asked. Throughout the entire research process, peer debriefing also occurred with another doctoral candidate with experience in education from the general educator viewpoint (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Having someone challenge all aspects and be a sounding board allowed me to fully investigate both sides of the study and remain unbiased.

**Identification of Attributes**

Specific characteristics or attributes were determined to be important for this research. Thus, selection criteria were adhered to for every participant. The shared experience of working in a district that no longer offered one type of programming for special education students was the primary element required. The timeframe of working within the district was also important because the program changes did not occur until approximately three years ago. Thus, students who were previously placed in the resource class setting and were now placed in a general education inclusion setting were still enrolled on the campuses involved in the study. Each person also met the criteria of experience working with special education students in either setting to compare academic progress. Academic progress was not gauged by actual grades or scores, rather it was determined by the opinions of the teachers and their perceptions to
determine how much the student truly learned and retained in each setting. The progress measures were not specific to individual students, rather these measures were about a group of students that shared disability characteristics that affected learning in multiple ways. The main goal was determining which setting was more beneficial for increased academic success based on teacher perspective.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once the interview data was collected, the data itself was organized and analyzed. As part of the data analysis, organized statements from the interviews were grouped into themes as evidence of common experience. The information was synthesized and summarized until the themes told the story of the participants. The experiences of each participant might have differences or there might be similarities, but it was important to gather enough data to determine results. The specific themes were analyzed using coding procedures. Both emic and etic perspectives were required. The NVIVO software program was used to organize data and code results. The software codes did not provide an analysis of the material; therefore, thematic analysis was required for complete understanding. Adams and Lawrence (2015) state that using analytic induction and a priori content analysis are helpful to ensure understanding. Data specific to the topic must be turned into meaningful information and data was interpreted in a scholarly manner.

Limitations of the Research Design

As with all research, there was the possibility of collecting limited data or results. Some of the conditions or circumstances that affected or confined the present study included the main restriction of receiving limited results from only one district. The data contained opinions expressed from an educator’s point of view, which is subjective to their experiences. The
selection criteria were limited to the available participants. All data collected were from teachers, with no other personnel, parent, or student data included. Another limitation was the time lapse from when the program was offered to the present because teachers have now adapted to having special education students in their classes. Several limitations related to the analysis, self-reporting, instrumentation, sampling, and time constraints included the task of completing the 16 individual interviews, as well as the amount of transcription, coding, and additional analysis for a group that size. One of the main drawbacks of the qualitative research design used was the lack of quantitative data to show actual student progress separated by setting.

**Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability are essential aspects of any research project and allow the researcher to clarify specific procedures, so that others will understand the legitimacy of the study and be able to duplicate the study if desired. Creswell (2013) and Shenton (2004) explained the extreme importance of both validity and reliability to the researcher and the audience, and how these verify that a qualitative research study has been performed using the appropriate standards and limiting any biases that might have occurred within a study.

Creswell (2013) described several processes that the researcher could perform after collecting qualitative data to ensure that the information was trustworthy. It was important to include processes for validity both during and after data collection. The processes used during the data collection in the present study included peer debriefing and member checking. After taking notes from the interviews, including a summarization of responses, each respondent immediately checked and confirmed that the information was correct. After data was collected and the analysis had begun, the use of an external audit, peer debriefing, and reflexivity occurred. By involving people that were not connected to the research topic and having them
audit and review the data allowed for additional explanation in areas that might appear limited (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After completing research that was personal to the participants, peer debriefing was completed so everyone involved understood the purpose of the research and how the personal information they provided was being used. This was not able to be shared before data collection but was disclosed at the end of each interview and participants were encouraged to ask questions if they wanted further explanation. Aside from verifying the credibility of the information gathered from the participants, I provided the personal connection and information related to the topic as it applied to the participants. Bracketing was not necessary; however, when the researcher is close to the topic it is important to ensure that the researcher’s personal feelings, beliefs, and opinions are not included within the actual data collection. It is important to note the connection within the research, so there was no confusion as to why the research was completed in the way that it was. In a phenomenological study, it is acceptable for the researcher to have a connection if their information is fully disclosed yet kept separate from any part of the data collection process (Creswell, 2013).

In addition to verifying credibility, dependability is just as important to ensure the transferability of information for additional studies within the same topic. Shenton (2004) explained that researcher reflection could also allow for replication of a study by having the researcher detail all the steps used during the data collection and analysis process. Providing sufficient contextual information about the field work site can allow for transferability. During a qualitative study, in-depth interviews can allow overlap of credibility and dependability (Shenton, 2004). The more in-depth the questioning and responses from the interviews are, the more reliable the information is considered, especially when the information gathered is specific to one person’s lived experiences and individual thoughts. For a portion of the semi-structured
interviews, the same questions were asked of each participant that then led to the ability of additional open-ended questions specific to each participant, with the use of consistency lending itself to better reliability (Creswell, 2013).

**Expected Findings**

Students with disabilities have special needs that may influence their education. Over the last several decades, various studies have attempted to determine in which setting students with disabilities should be educated. This is a process that should be dependent upon the individual needs of the students and not on any one guideline or limited options provided by the district. State and federal laws ensure that all students are educated equally and districts must follow rules such as FAPE and LRE; however, this does not mean inclusion will work for everyone. Data shows that special education students still need some specialized setting to learn appropriately, which is increasingly more difficult to achieve in the general education setting. LRE is important but academic success should be more of the focus, and the research shows that students with disabilities will learn more in specialized settings than in general settings with inclusion. Teachers that have experience working with students that have special educational needs concur that some students can be successful in a general education classroom, but the higher the needs of the students, the more restrictive the setting needs to be. It is extremely difficult to provide individualized educational needs while also teaching students without special needs. It helps to have a special education teacher within the classroom, but the reality is that the number of supports that special education teachers can provide is limited because of the sheer structure that must be maintained within a general education classroom. There are more options for individualized instruction within a special education resource class. This setting should only be provided on an individual basis for students that showed little to no academic success within
the general education classroom; however, the resource setting should not be removed completely.

**Ethical Issues**

When conducting research with human participants, it is imperative to follow strict guidelines for obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality. For the present study, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before any data collection occurred and participant consent was provided in writing, which detailed the exact expectations of each party involved. Conflict of interest was deterred by stating the purpose of the study in that it was to gather data that would benefit students regardless of the researcher’s personal views. My personal opinions were not included in the data collection. Guided questions were included that allowed for follow-up questions specific to the individual’s responses without inserting personal views or guiding responses. My position was that it is important to determine the best setting, regardless of the results, and I wanted unbiased data from various sources to guide future programming decisions for all students in special education. The government only provides vague guidelines; therefore, districts must use their best judgment to make better decisions. There were no specific ethical issues within the study because the student’s settings were not being changed, only surveyed after the fact to determine success or not. There was not any individual student information gathered, only the overall opinion of educators. Throughout the research, all data was kept locked up and in an electronic database with myself controlling all access. Three years after the completion of the study, all materials will be destroyed.

**Summary**

Research is a process that begins when a question is determined to be significant within a field. Once the research is narrowed and focused on one specific question, the planning on how
to answer the question begins. Depending upon the expected results, the research method that provides the most beneficial information is pursued. If the answer to the research question is meant to broaden the available information on a specific topic without proving or disproving a hypothesis, then qualitative research is the appropriate method. When the selected participants share a common experience and may have interpreted the experience in the same way but with various details, a phenomenological approach is essential to elicit deeper meaning and understanding of the personal events.

The purpose of the phenomenological case study was to understand how the lived experiences and teacher perceptions, within one district, affected the educators’ opinions of the effectiveness and academic success of special education students in special education resource settings and general education inclusive settings. Much of the existing research has failed to draw adequate conclusions about how educators should determine which setting is best for which students. The emerging research question referred to the determination of which setting was better for special education students to learn academic content, the resource setting or inclusion setting, and to understand better the influence of separation or inclusion on students with disabilities and the effect of the setting on academics.

The phenomenological case study was the best approach to determine an educator’s view about students’ academic success because Creswell (2013) explained that phenomenology is best used when a deep and thick interview process can produce data to be analyzed for common themes and emerging patterns. Data was collected via a series of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions with a sample of teachers that fit the same criteria within one district that had chosen to alter programming options for students with disabilities. This small sample may or
may not be representative of an entire population; however, it is significant enough to represent the population of this one district (Miles & Huberman, 1994). 

A presentation of the results of the study using the phenomenological approach is included in Chapter 4. The next chapter also details data collection methods and elaborates on data analysis methods including the use of technology for sorting, coding, and analysis. Detailed discussions, possible explanations, and specific results are provided.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine teacher perceptions to determine whether special education students should be educated in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes. A phenomenological approach was used to obtain descriptive details of the perceptions of teachers when investigating and contrasting different settings for special education students and the effect on their academic progress. Research was obtained from interviews with 16 public education teachers currently employed in Texas. During the data analysis process, various themes were evident that showed similar opinions in response to interview questions. Chapter 4 will describe the participant sample, data obtained, results of the data analyses, and findings from the present study. It is important to note that not all participants are represented in every example since each person did not comment about every subject; however, each of the 16 participant views are included in various sections. The chapter will also look at the role of the researcher to more fully explain the importance of the study and the implications that the results may have in the future. The central research question was:

Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? This central question was supported by the subsequent research questions:

Q1. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting?

Q2. What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful?
Q3. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

Description of the Sample

The participants were 16 certified teachers currently employed in a secondary setting within a rural school district in Texas. The projected sample was 20 teachers, specifically 10 special education teachers and 10 general education teachers. A purposeful sampling technique produced a representative sample with similar characteristics and who met the specific criteria including a minimum length of employment, secondary teaching experience including grades six through 12, and experience working with special education students. Characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity were not considered to have any effect on data collection or sampling procedures. The selection criteria produced an estimated 30 eligible teachers with the number of general education teachers outweighing special education teachers. Preliminary contact was initiated via email requesting volunteers and a brief face-to-face request occurred when scheduling the interviews. Some difficulty was encountered trying to obtain the full number of participants (i.e., 20), yet a significant amount of data was collected from the 16 participants and according to Creswell (2013) that is an acceptable number for a qualitative case study.

Some additional attributes of the participants were discovered during the interview process and may help explain their individual views but were not originally considered as part of the selection criteria. Out of the 10 general education teachers, two had prior experience as special education teachers and still held valid special education certificates. Out of the six special education teachers, two had experience working with a specific group of special education students: one as an adaptive behavior teacher and the other as a functional life skills teacher. The final sample of participants included 10 general education teachers and six special
education teachers. Among all 16 participants, the length of time teaching in the district ranged from three years to 11 years. The length of the interviews varied depending upon the participant’s willingness to provide detailed information and ranged from 25 to 55 minutes.

**Research Methodology and Analysis**

The field of education is one that can be viewed and approached in multiple ways depending upon the results that are being sought. When looking for success or weakness related to data trends such as state testing results, a quantitative methodology is appropriate. However, when information is individualized and based on perception, it is imperative to use a qualitative method that allows participants the opportunity to discuss and explain their viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). Some concepts cannot be measured with numerical data, and yet when experiences are shared, themes or trends can be identified. That shared experience or phenomenology creates a pathway for finding similarities and differences among participants. The best way to obtain individual data is by the interview process and face-to-face interviews to reveal more personal information (Yin, 2014). Therefore, a phenomenological case study with multiple participants providing personal information via a face-to-face interview method is justified for the present study.

**Phenomenological case study.** When there are many participants in a qualitative case study (e.g., 16 in the present study), the researcher must devote an extensive amount of time to the project as this is essential for the data collection and analysis processes. Once sufficient data has been obtained, the researcher must begin the next lengthy process of synthesizing and organizing to determine patterns, relationships, and any additional factors that might have an effect when answering the overall research questions. Although the sample was limited and the data obtained was personal in the present study, the hope was that the information would elicit
conversations and ideas to be applied to further research since other educators may experience some of the same thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

**Summary of the Findings**

Data was collected using an interview guide with pre-determined questions and supplementary questions as decided by the flow of each interview. Due to the differences among general education teachers and special education teachers, two templates were created with 15 questions each. (Please refer to Appendices A and B for interview questions). The interview questions were derived from the central research question and subsequent research questions, and focused on individual thoughts, views, opinions, and perceptions of teachers when working with special education students. The questions also emphasized personal experiences related to the academic progress of special education students. The most evident pattern within the data shows that the majority of teachers feel behavior is the main deterrent to academic success.

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

Data analysis began with the transcription of audio files to written documents, which were then uploaded into NVIVO software for qualitative analysis. The software recognized many similarities that emerged as major themes with many subcategories of focus. To further organize the data, four broad categories were determined and themes were found within those categories, as well as within the subcategories (Creswell, 2013). The four broad categories were challenges within an inclusive setting, successes within an inclusive setting, challenges within a special education setting, and successes within a special education setting, and are clarified in Tables 1–4. Definitive answers from qualitative studies can be difficult to obtain because of repetition and use of interchangeable concepts. Because the central research question is looking at both inclusive and special education settings, it is important to present as much data as
possible to see the entire picture. Tables 1–4 show a summary of all ideas presented during the interviews, in no specific order, and are categorized into four tables to help with a hierarchical analysis when the themes are later discussed. The recurring themes identified were behavior interfering with teaching, student’s academic progress with content, need for socialization, district-level concerns, programming depends on individual students, and the need for a combination of inclusion and special settings. The order that the tables are presented in was determined by the categories within the tables with the highest number of comments.

**Challenges within an inclusive setting.** As shown in Table 1, 12 concepts appeared many times when participants discussed challenges within an inclusive classroom. The topic most commonly referred to was the behavior of students with special needs interfering with teaching. Among the 16 participants, there were 127 comments about this concern. The next highest number of comments was regarding how students with special needs had a limited understanding of the curriculum content and experienced limited progress in an inclusive setting. Once again, all 16 participants mentioned this as a concern with 92 references. The next two most common topics referred to the inclusion teachers’ lack of knowledge about the curriculum content with 32 comments from 11 participants and large class sizes with 30 comments from 14 participants. The next highest topics included the concerns about teaching the entire curriculum while preparing for state exams with 24 comments from 10 participants and the lack of collaboration between general education teachers and inclusion teachers with 22 comments from 10 participants. The remaining six topics, while still valid concerns, were only mentioned 12 times or less and were not viewed as being overly significant. Nevertheless, perception and importance were relative to the participants and these topics are mentioned again when connections between themes are discussed.
Table 1

*Challenges within an Inclusive Setting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to the topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior interfering with teaching</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s limited academic progress with content</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion staff lacking content knowledge</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sizes and number of special education students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching all curriculum requirements and preparing for state assessments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of collaboration between inclusion and general education teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing sufficient accommodations and modifications</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effect on general education students (i.e., slows down or lower level of instruction)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited time in class by inclusion teachers (1, 2, or 3 times per week)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views of separate responsibility (inclusion staff are responsible for special education students)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to re-teach in small group or pull-out</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffectiveness of substitutes for inclusion staff</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following are statements from participants that support some of the topics listed in Table 1 in relation to challenges within an inclusive classroom:

*Participant 1.* “You know I haven’t been in math for 25 years, except for sporadically and I know that I didn’t always have the notes ahead of time or know what we were doing ahead of time and planning … I wasn’t able to plan with the teachers to know.”

*Participant 3.* “I feel like in some classes it just depends on the teaching style of the teacher. Like I can be beneficial, but in a lot of the classes I just feel like I’m there just to redirect behavior or you know to make sure kids get notes and things of that nature, but I am not really doing a lot of re-teaching and things to help out with the curriculum I feel like, if that makes sense.”

*Participant 8.* “And they get the same instruction that the general education class gets. Things are not scaffolded, that additional attention that they may need is not necessarily given except by the paraprofessional.”

*Participant 10.* “I feel like that pace is too fast for a lot of them and you don’t get tons of opportunity to break vocabulary down for them, so they kind of get left out because if they’re not in an in-class support class or a co-teach class, whatever you want to call it, they don’t get the small group for sure you know. And if they have reading issues they’re way behind.”

*Participant 11.* “However, sometimes I feel like the kids are so far behind that they have no idea what’s going on or no idea what the teacher is even saying or even understand the vocabulary because they are far behind and some of the far behind could be because they’re absent a lot or just the learning disabilities.” “They work slower and they might need more help so there’s more after the teacher is done, it kind of does take away from
the other students because the teacher is kind of one-on-one with them and when you have the higher numbers of students in each class, like seven, that all need help. Then you’ve got the teacher and the co-teacher taken by these seven students and then you’re trying to get to all the other students as well and it’s just … sometimes it’s hard to get to everybody and then you end up only helping them with one and you say ‘well OK now I’ve helped you with this one I’m going to move on to this person and help them with one’ and then I come back around and they still haven’t done another problem and so sometimes it kind of hurts them.”

Participant 12. “Honestly no. The reason is because when you’re trying to give the students the support they need, especially if it’s that low student like that, you tend to lose the regular class students because you’re not paying attention to them. It’s like they realize you’re off trying to help somebody else so they take advantage of the situation. Not the students themselves, it is the students around them that start taking advantage of the situation.”

Participant 14. “Just because modify would imply that there are severe disabilities and that it would bring down the instruction level of the class, to where I, like in eighth grade, we make assumptions that they’ve seen solving equations before so we do a brief review, we get them up to speed and then we move on fairly quickly. But if you have kids that are two or three years below grade level, then I’m basically starting back from ground zero and teaching from nothing all the way up to grade level from no skills to grade level skills and some of the kids in the general classes don’t need that much instruction and so now we’re slowing the class that for them it creates a disparity between my higher kids and my lower kids.”
**Participant 15.** “I think having them in there together helps them out so they have somebody to work with, but sometimes I feel like I have to water down everything for all students but I don’t know, just playing the catch up game. Trying to keep everybody on the same level but remembering that they’re not at the same level.”

**Successes within an inclusive setting.** Table 2 shows the eight specific successes mentioned by participants when discussing the general education inclusive classroom. The topic occurring the most had 38 comments from 14 participants and was that the main success with inclusion classes was when some students with special needs showed progress with the content. The second most important success of an inclusion class was mentioned 28 times by all 16 participants and stated that inclusion provides extra supports including presence of inclusion staff and helping students with special needs be successful. Nine participants believed that inclusion classes were successful because such classes increased the socialization opportunities for students with special needs, which was mentioned 25 times. The remaining five topics mentioned referred to various successes that applied not only to special education students benefiting but to all students benefiting. Specifically, general education students received more help from the inclusion teacher while learning to work with different students, and the general education teachers benefited by having another teacher present to assist with teaching and supporting students.
Table 2

Successes within an Inclusive Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some show progress with content</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra support for providing accommodations and modifications/Students progress because of inclusion staff</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased socialization for special education students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy working with another teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have two staff members to connect with</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra support for general education students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased awareness of differences for general education students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows small group or one-on-one instruction for all students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following statements support the fact that participants felt as though an inclusive setting was successful:

*Participant 2.* “I actually do, I like the whole co-teach, now the last year my teacher actually would get up and teach some and I was the support. This year we had a new co-teacher so she wasn’t familiar with the content so she was just there to help support and with discipline. So yeah, I have no problems with that, I really like that co-teacher version though where you have someone who knows the content, it gives you a break and
they teach and they teach it differently or say it differently and I get to go work with the kids who are struggling.”

Participant 4. “I think being able to help more kids individually is always going to be a good thing. So even if that teacher is special education certified, she can still help everybody. The principal came in one time, it was an inclusion class, and he said ‘you know it’s really great that I can’t tell which kids are special education’ because the co-teacher was helping everybody and I think that’s what it should look like. I don’t think that you should be able to tell that a kid is special education just by how the classroom looks. I think that all kids deserve to have the best education they can get. Nobody gets a better education than somebody else because they don’t have a label placed on them or vice versa. So, I think that my general education students benefit from that as well.”

Participant 6. “Oh my perception of that … OK so I mean I like it and I think it’s a good environment and I think it allows for a lot of flexibility in being able to meet the students’ needs if it’s something that I’m not quite competent in, I guess you would say if you’re just not expert in, then the general education teacher can go over and assess then I can be monitoring the rest of the students. But my perception of it is that it’s a good thing, I like it. I think it’s a good place for kids.”

Participant 7. “I think it’s beneficial for the kids. There’s a lot of restructuring that needs to go on. With the teachers and the inclusion teacher actually working together more. But I think it’s very beneficial to the kids when things are ran appropriately.”

Participant 8. “I am a proponent of inclusion when it’s done correctly and the students are accommodated and modified correctly, I see the students being successful as well as the teachers being successful.”
Participant 14. “I think they make it more bearable just because I know that there’s somebody else in the class that is keeping an eye on the student that might be getting lost or getting off track and so it’s always good to have a second set of eyes.”

Participant 15. “I definitely enjoy having the inclusion teacher in here because we can kind of bounce ideas off of each other if something’s not working she might have a better idea or what not, but I do like that they are grouped into a couple of classes so it’s not all in one, or you know one in every period. Kind of helps to have two sections of it.”

Participant 16. “They’re being the support that I’m not. There, the kids know that they can go to them when I’m not always available and they can get, not only emotionally but you know academically too. You know if they have problems or something they’re struggling with and they can help them.”

Challenges within a special education setting. Due to some confusion throughout the interview process, it is important to reiterate the misconception of the definition of the resource setting. The resource setting is a specialized setting, not a type of class or location in a room, and any time a student is removed from the general education environment it is considered a resource setting. Historically, many districts have referred to the removal of students from a general education class to a special education class as a resource setting. When the class takes the place of an academic area such as Mathematics or English, and the student no longer has full AGC, it is called a resource class. If the student attends a general education academic class but spends time in a special education setting for part of the day, then that is considered a content mastery class, even though it is also referred to as a resource setting. During the interviews, it was evident that many general education teachers did not understand the difference between the two special education settings; therefore, Table 3 reflects participant comments about both
resource classes and content mastery classes since both are separate special education settings.

The additional specialized setting of pull-out is not included in Table 3 since the student is typically not scheduled into a separate class setting in that situation.

Looking at the specialized setting option of a resource class or specialized setting of any type, Table 3 shows the challenges associated with teaching a resource class. There were four major topics discussed, with the main concern of placing special education students in a separate resource class, mostly due to behavior, being mentioned by seven participants in 12 separate responses. The second biggest concern was the separation of special education students from their general education peers. The third concern was that there were various levels of academic ability within one class. The last concern was that the special education teachers teaching the resource class were either not certified in the subject area or did not have enough knowledge about the subject they were teaching.

Table 3

*Challenges within a Special Education Setting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becomes a behavior placement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation from peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various academic levels of students in one class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ lack of general content knowledge/not certified in area</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following are statements that show the challenges with a separate special education setting such as the resource class setting:
Participant 1. “They weren’t gonna work … they weren’t gonna work, it was more of a, not a resource for students that really struggled and need extra help and couldn’t, it was for the ones who could and just refused to do it.”

Participant 3. “I mean definitely, it would need to be like strictly academic students. Trying not to have any behaviors in there because that hurts the learning process. Maybe have time to sit down with like you know, if you are doing math, the math curriculum coordinator and just have time to actually plan the lessons. Look at what the general education teachers are doing and then plan a lesson that would fit your students and the grade level they’re working on. I guess a lot more planning and collaborating with the general education teacher.”

Participant 6. “You know it’s just them, they just sit in there together and I feel that they do push themselves more when they’re integrated in with the general population.” “So, I think I had in that resource class maybe eight probably. Maybe eight that were in there and there were two that were really low. And then there’s another group of like three that were kind of at the same level and then the other kids probably should not have been in that resource class.”

Participant 8. “I am not a huge proponent of resource. I have yet to see resource done correctly in my mind. In my mind resource should be a temporary setting with some definitive end goals in mind. And my experience in resource has been primarily classroom management issues.”

Successes within a special education setting. The successes within a specialized setting are shown in Table 4. The most discussed positive aspect of teaching students in a special education setting was that there was time to reteach concepts and further explain what was being
taught, which was mentioned 11 times by nine participants. Close behind with nine comments from eight participants was the ability to teach the students at the appropriate modified level by focusing on progress instead of proficiency in all grade level expectations. Seven participants each mentioned that specialized settings gave them time to know the students and the ability to provide them with individual supports. The next two topics were each mentioned six times with smaller class sizes mentioned by six participants and the ability to teach at a slower pace mentioned by five additional participants. The last success was mentioned by two participants that stated the special education setting allowed for differentiation and ease with varying teaching strategies.

Table 4

Successes within a Special Education Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time to re-teach</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can teach at a modified level and focus on progress not proficiency in TEKS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual support/know students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small class sizes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can teach at a slower pace</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various teaching strategies/differentiation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following statements support success within a specialized setting such as a resource class or content mastery setting:

Participant 1. “Where we can re-teach if we know they’re struggling.”

Participant 3. “I think in a resource classroom I’m definitely more focused on hitting the
level where the students are as opposed to trying to bring them up to a level they’re supposed to be. And then we were able to you know bring lessons to what they need, to teach how they need to be taught … re-watch videos the math teacher made about concepts and do actual practice and just kind of reinforce what was happening in the general education class.”

Participant 4. “So, there’s a couple students in particular that would really benefit from resource because they’re just not on the same level as other kids there I mean. I’ve had students before that really needed a heavily modified curriculum but they, they are certainly not what would be considered life skill students. They’re not quite there, they can participate in class and they can do, you know, the basic things that they can read and they can write and those kinds of things but they need a heavily modified curriculum where it’s more focused on what their needs are and can move at their pace.”

Participant 5. “So that being said, you can go at a slower pace, I will say this you can go at a slower pace in a modified class for sure. I mean I would say resource is probably better for most of them.”

Participant 6. “Correct and we won’t say the word content mastery, because evidently that’s a bad word around here. But that’s kind of what I’m saying. Like they need, they need to have, it’s sometimes it’s just a confidence builder to hear it a second time you know and to let them get it. But a lot of times, it is just too fast they don’t process as fast as what we need, again 47 minutes a general education kid sometimes feels completely overwhelmed with how fast we are having to get this stuff out. And the things that the general education teachers are required to do, the TEKS {Texas Essential knowledge and Skills} they have to cover before the test and {etc.} know it’s a lot. So, a lot of times the
really low special education kids, the modified kids, they get frustrated and lost.”

Participant 7. “For instance, the kids that are in my class right now probably would do better in more of a resource in that smaller group and get them out of alternative setting.”

Participant 10. “I think the idea of a resource class is great. And in a resource class you get to spend more time on stuff rather than like having to make sure you hit everything by the end of the year and all these in-depth things by the end of the year. I think the dynamics in the makeup—if you would change a little bit and not cram all the behavior kids in one resource class it would work wonderfully. Just because you get the opportunity to get those kids what they actually need to have at the right pace and with the right terms and vocabulary.”

Themes

Theme: Behavior interfering with teaching. Among the many connections that were uncovered, behavior was the topic that appeared the most. Even when the intention was to separate academic progress from any other factor, such as behavior or a need for socialization, behavior was mentioned repeatedly. Figure 1 shows the theme of behavior concerns separately to emphasize the importance of the participants’ responses in relation to behavior of special education students. All 16 participants expressed significant concerns about behavior within an inclusion setting. The highest concerns were made by a general education teacher (16%), whereas the lowest was from a special education inclusion teacher (1%).
Behavior Interfering with Teaching

Behavior in relation to an inclusive setting. The following statements support various concerns about behavior of special education students in a general education inclusion classroom:

Participant 1. “And like I said the one student who does have inclusion support for three classes, we are taking it out this year because I feel like you don’t have any respect for women and really don’t have a lot of respect for authority, he has no fear of any consequences, ISS {in class suspension}, detention, call home, there is nothing there and so I feel like, even the math teacher said he just wants to disrupt, I mean that’s his goal.”

Participant 4. “Where their behavior becomes an issue everybody deserves an education so when you have a student in that class that’s making it impossible for everybody else then that might be a time when that child needs to be pulled for his own good and for the good of everybody else in the class. Sometimes you can get a hold on those behaviors.
and maybe to pull out where you’re doing small group instruction, but sometimes it’s so
evident and so distracting that it prevents everybody else from being successful.”

*Participant 10.* “That they just, they’d rather misbehave or not do their work than try to
do their work and maybe show me that they didn’t know.”

*Participant 13.* “Well, there are times where the student’s behavior, they don’t, he
doesn’t want to accept the help of the paraprofessionals, which can cause you know him
to get frustrated. And have problems in the class and can distract from the other students
sometimes which gets them off task and if I’m doing a lesson and I’m like trying to work
with the Smart Board up here, they’re paying attention to me but they’re hearing
whatever is going on with him, as much as I try and just work through it. That can be
distracting some time and so yes, I think sometimes it definitely, if his behavior escalates
to the point where it’s becoming a distraction. Yes, it definitely affects the class and it
affects them academically too.”

*Participant 15.* “Because again the more distractions you have in the class the more time
the teacher has to spend with that particular student and it’s hard to reach all of the kids.”

**Behavior in relation to a special education setting.** The following statements support
characteristics about the behavior of special education students in a special education setting:

*Participant 1.* “They’re worse in a small group. I feel like when you have those kids in a
small group they want to be the class clown, they want to disrupt everybody and there’s a
few of then that’s their goal every day … And like I said, it was a bad experience. That
was the one year we had all the behavior kids.” “I mean there was a refusal to do work, a
refusal to take tests, I mean it was ... You know we were trying to make it fun and
interactive and that group, they just weren’t going to do it. So, I feel like it was kind of a
waste for them that year ... Like I said it was their whole attitude and they knew they were special education students and they weren’t going to fail and they were going to be promoted to ninth grade.”

Participant 5. “So not only have a ranging of immaturity levels, which to me sometimes that situation of just getting them all together, just the immaturity level caused problems of the difference in the range of ages of kids.”

Participant 6. “Behaviorally I didn’t have issues with behavior but I don’t have classroom management issues. I’ve seen other resource classes that have had great behavior issues because it’s just them and they don’t, there’s not anything pushing them to behave differently or there’s nobody else that has that same expectation.”

Participant 8. “And my experience in resource has been primarily classroom management issues … As much time is spent managing the behaviors of the students with disabilities as academic learning goes on. Because you’ve got a special mix of students there that are drawing off each other. And they understand they are in there for a specific reason and they become masterful at their escape avoidance behaviors … There are many that would fall in that category and if they’re not typically a behavior student many of them became a behavior problem in that setting.”

Participant 10. “But then they put all the kids in one resource class and so it’s difficult to make it work with all those levels of kids in the same resource English class and then it tends to be that the kids that are in resource also have behavior issues. So, you’re addressing behavior more than academics a lot of times.”

**Relationship between data and the research questions.** In addition to the above data, the following statements support two of the subsequent research questions: (a) What are the
perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting, and (b) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

Participant 3. “And I mean sometimes behavior stems from the fact that they don’t understand so I mean you would, but I wouldn’t necessarily use that to determine you know the correct placement, I mean you’ve got to put them where they need to be and then deal with the behavior.”

Participant 4. “So, in terms of my personal philosophy is that all kids deserve an education regardless of need, regardless of economic status, whatever it is they deserve to have an education. So, it needs to, part of it needs to be, are they capable of getting the education that they deserve in that classroom, sitting in a regular general education classroom setting or is it going to be too difficult? Are they going to be able to get the modifications and accommodations that they need with that many students?”

Participant 6. “OK so I’m not going to sacrifice the whole for one. And so, if it is their support or their needs deter or effect the rest, then I don’t believe they need to be integrated. So, in other words if we have a kid who is learning disabled below grade level and they have behavioral issues that are very disruptive in the classroom and it’s so frequent that they’re having to be pulled out of the classroom frequently and its disrupting the environment in there, then they would not be, I don’t think that they would be placed in their full time you know until they can get control of those behaviors.”

Participant 16. “If they were such a disruption in class that I could not teach, then get them out of my room. But if I am able to teach with them and they don’t hinder other people from learning, then I don’t have a problem with them being in there.”
Theme: Student’s academic progress with content. In this situation, I specifically asked the participants not to consider things such as behavior or socialization needs and had the participants focus on academics alone.

Student’s academic progress with content in relation to an inclusive setting. It was evident that general education teachers felt that special education students were making progress within the inclusive setting (66%); however, they also felt that they were experiencing academic struggles (38%) (Figure 2). Special education inclusion teachers had a higher percentage of believing that special education students were struggling academically (27%); however, there were some special inclusion teachers that also saw academic progress (18%). The two participants that had experience as both general education and special education teachers had a higher percentage of acknowledging academic struggles in an inclusive setting (16%). The adaptive behavior and functional life skills special education teachers also felt that students with special needs struggled more in an inclusion setting (9%).
The following quotes from the interviews refer to various academic progress or struggles seen within the inclusive setting:

*Participant 2.* “No, not at all. The grades are … no. So, if a kid has an 80 and I don’t want to give a kid a 70 the whole time I mean if they earned an 80 they earn an 80 but they didn’t earn it on their own. They got an 80, they did every assignment by themselves. You know what I mean if I graded it like I graded the rest of the class they would not have earned maybe an 80 on that particular assignment and with their tests, they get a lot of redirection and help where they wouldn’t if they were just sitting in the classroom on their own, you know.”
Participant 3. “Probably not as much as they need. I mean one ten minute reteach is not
going to get them to master the concept.” “To their academic ability … no. I think it’s a
lot of you know case managers pulling them to make up zeroes or making them do test
corrections. If they didn’t have someone there looking over them, their grades would
definitely be a lot lower. I feel like.”

Participant 11. “I think developmentally as they mature they are getting … they’re able
to understand more as they mature. I don’t think it’s necessarily because they’ve been in
a general education setting.”

Participant 12. “Yeah. I do. Because if they were able to be successful on their own
without that other teacher trying to give them more support than what’s needed, then I
would say OK we’re meeting their needs. When you have someone that has to do that
then you know you’re not.”

Participant 13. “Well I think we need to look at, for an English Language Arts kind of
thing when you look at their reading level and are they able to complete the basic reading
task that we do and whatever grade reading class they’re in because if they can’t because
we read a lot of texts together. So, we can have class discussion, if they are first or
second grade reading level there’s no way that they’re going to be able to understand The
Outsiders or something like that and so I think that that would be like the number one
thing. That I would want to look at to make sure that they’re able to, either without
accommodations or with a few accommodations like reading assistance or just having it
read out loud to them and they’re able to understand the content.”

Participant 15. “It can. Because some kids will get it like right off the bat and then get
kind of irritated that I’m saying the same thing over and over because not everybody gets
it right off the bat. Or they finish work a lot faster than others, I don’t know it’s a balance.”

Participant 16. “Maybe not give as many problems or just try to get through that. I mean in general that’s kind of with the kiddos who were in Algebra one, and are in my class now, that never really learned how to solve equations. I mean I go slow as I can to start with, but at some point I’ve gotta just go on and if they don’t get it, they don’t get it. So, it’s just, that’s where the pulling out teacher would really help, you know with those kids, because then she can pull out and work with them.”

*Student’s academic progress with content in relation to a special education setting.*

When discussing this setting, the participants had difficulty separating academic progress from the other factors such as behavior. Data that was solely related to academic progress or struggles within a special education setting are shown in Figure 3. With only 22 total comments made about academics, special education inclusion teachers mentioned progress and struggles the most, with seven occurrences of struggles and three occurrences of progress. General education teachers agreed that there were at least three instances of academic progress in special education settings and there was no mention of struggles academically within a special setting. The adaptive behavior and functional life skills special education teachers showed that there were some struggles with three statements, and two statements that showed progress. The teachers certified as both general education and special education stated that there were the same number of struggles and progress with two references for each.
The following are some of the comments made by participants when discussing academic progress or struggles of students in various special education settings:

Participant 1. “We had such three different levels of students.”

Participant 3. “And so, I was trying everything the general education class was doing but these kids were not grade level. I had to kind of find a way to maybe go back a few grade levels and look at the vertical alignment and do a little less and maybe leave out some concepts that you know I knew they just weren’t ever gonna get you know. So, it was kind of like a regular classroom at a lower grade level … knowing what our resource class was like, I think that it wouldn’t have necessarily been beneficial to them because they would not have been at least exposed to all the concepts.”
Participant 6. “They didn’t push themselves. I actually taught IPC [Integrated Physics and Chemistry] and biology and when they had just themselves around each other they didn’t push themselves as much as they did when they had their other population with them you know.”

Participant 7. “Well the difference is a smaller group and so you are more segregating the kids who are having a lot of trouble. A lot of times it would turn into just a bunch of behavior kids that were in there. If there was a way around that, it may not be such a bad thing for the highly modified kids.”

Participant 9. “And not as much as they could have if they were in a resource class.”

Participant 11. “OK let’s come out here, let’s regroup and then we can go back again after we regrouped, but I really think there needs to be some sort of time where you actually pull him out to reteach or to re-explain. And it may not even be a reteach, it might just be putting in English for them, you know, or simplified vocabulary. And then pulling them back in, OK now you know what to do. Or even a time or an opportunity to front-load them with something easier before they even go in and then they’ll understand more what’s going on with the teachers.”

Relationship between data and the research questions. The data above support the central research question and one of the subsequent questions: (a) Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes, and (b) What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful?
**Theme: Need for socialization.** In addition to behavior and academics standing out as important themes, there were a few more subjects that came up quite frequently, one specifically discussing socialization. Table 5 shows the most common statements related to socialization.

Table 5

Socialization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special education students need to be around non-disabled peers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General education students need to learn about differences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall concern about separation from peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education students can be around same type of peers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Need for socialization in relation to an inclusive setting.** Some quotes supporting inclusion for socialization include:

*Participant 4.* “I feel like trying to get as many kids into general and classrooms as possible is what’s best because the kids once they graduate high school they have to go up to the real world there isn’t you know a resource job out there. There are jobs that are better for some people. And more suitable for some people but they need to learn even if it’s just the social aspect they need to learn to be able to work with everybody else.”

*Participant 7.* “I wouldn’t say better—I think it might be easier for everybody but then we’re taking away the whole reason why the kid is even in the general education classroom. So, and our job really isn’t to make the teacher’s job easier—I mean if we
can that’s great, but at the same time you know the kids need to learn social [skills]. They need to learn how to be around other kids. They need to learn you know how to learn with all the distractions that come with being in a classroom with a bunch of kids and if you’re constantly removing them from that, just to be able to give them their assignments. Now I think after you’ve done a couple of assignments and they are still not getting it, then it’s time to look at alternative.”

*Participant 8.* “In my opinion but you know that’s not just academic that’s also social and emotional I think you would be foolish not to look at the student as a whole.”

*Participant 9.* “I do, I do think it’s good to see, it’s good to see everybody interacting together whether they’re general education or special education and it’s good to see them all interact together and it’s good to see that general education kids take them in and you know I have some, they were really quiet special education kids who won’t say much, and then when a group says ‘hey come work with us’ to see that kind of like a light shine, they’re like ‘hey somebody noticed that I’m by myself’ and I mean I like that. I like to see that, I like to see that they’re all together, I don’t ever want them to feel like they’re different from anybody else.”

*Participant 11.* “OK inclusion I think is good. For some of the students to just sit in there and listen to the vocabulary and listen to what all the other students are listening to, be a part of their class and their peers, and be able to be influenced by them, and just kind of taking notes and things like that.” “So, I really feel like I mean in the end the inclusion support I think it helps us grow as people. I know we’re supposed to educate—like the curriculum and things like that, but I think it does more for our students socially.”
Participant 12. “They’re learning more than just what’s being taught. They’re learning how to interact with other people, they are learning how to act within a social setting. They’re learning … I guess you would say manners in a way.”

Participant 13. “Well I think that one thing that I do like about having those kids in here is I’ve seen a lot of my special education inclusion students really grow not just from me but from interaction with their peers that are a little bit you know academically higher than they are. And saying ‘oh that's how they do it I need to do the same thing’ and I see a lot especially you know some of my higher level special education students are able to kind of mimic their peers and learn strategies and really be able to think in different ways after working with them. That’s why I love the collaboration so much and so that’s one thing I do love about having an inclusion of students in here with my general education students is that ability for them to collaborate together and be able to see kind of the way other students function, and even my general education students seeing the way other students’ kind of tackle problems. I think it is good.”

Participant 14. “{Special Education student’s name} brought just a culture of personality, like everybody loved this kid, and when he walked in and everybody would yell his name and because he was so well liked and it just brought the personality level in my class like way up because it was just such a happy, like the class kids liked each other in the class because of this one student and some of the special education kids do bring in a really positive personality.”

Need for socialization in relation to a special education setting. Although this concept was only mentioned by one teacher, this was someone who had experience as both a general education teacher and a special education teacher. The following are some statements made by
the teacher who brought up the point that some special education students might want to be around other students like themselves:

Participant 5. “If it’s a kid that would rather be around people of similar I.Q. or whatever it may be.” “I mean because the truth of the matter is, I mean like you know I think of the personality. I mean if a kid has a high level of confidence, it might, I mean I could see one high level of confidence it might not bother them to be in the class because ‘hey it doesn’t bother me, I’m trying hard.’” “The truth of the matter is more than likely most special education students probably don’t have an extremely high level of confidence … and so most people looking from the outside, they don’t know the situation of the kid, think he’s lazy when the truth of the matter is the one time that he was super excited and wanted to work hard, he got told he couldn’t do it right, so he’s completely shut down after that.”

Relationship between data and the research questions. The data described above supports two of the research questions: (a) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting, and (b) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

Theme: District-level concerns. Additional topics emerged among multiple participants that suggested these topics should be grouped together into one main theme of district-level concerns. Even though many of these concerns were not specific to one setting, they first emerged when discussing challenges of inclusion. There were several topics about a wide array of concerns, and each will be discussed individually to show the extent of the teacher perceptions that the data brought forth. These included class sizes, limited training provided to all
employees, availability of staff to support students, type of inclusion staff (co-teacher or paraprofessional), amount of time inclusion support was provided, content knowledge, collaboration between staff, separation of responsibility, ineffectiveness of substitutes for inclusion staff, and how decisions are made (Table 6). These statements reflect the participant’s feelings of things they cannot control yet that influence inclusive settings.

Table 6

District-level Concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion staff lacks content knowledge</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sizes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of collaboration between teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-teacher versus paraprofessional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff availability</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in class by inclusion staff (1, 2, or 3 times per week)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views that inclusion staff are responsible for special education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffectiveness of substitutes for inclusion staff</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making decisions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Class sizes. There were 14 participants with 30 separate comments that referred to class size as a challenge. The following statements raise concerns about class sizes:
Participant 9. “So finally, I had to go in and say ‘you got to stop, take some of these kids out’ because I can’t give the attention to the special education kids I need to, even though it’s a co-teach class, I can’t give attention the kids that need it more than the other kids and so they were accommodating for that. So I think having two or three is good but it’s when you get the big, and I know it’s for scheduling purposes, with the co-teacher and all that. But that sometimes doesn’t always work out best for the kids.”

Participant 10. “My thing is that it depends on how many are in there. What they like to do is—here’s your in-class support class and then they put all the kids in there and then it happens to be your largest class because then they put other kids in there. Then that has a dramatic effect on what you can get out of that class because you have so many kids that are at a lower level and so many kids who need to have differentiation which I struggle at. So that’s really hard. Just because the in-class support kids need so much help and if you’re not able to hit them then they kind of, not their fault, they just slow it down because you have to help them.” “I wish we could have enough in-class support people, to just always be there to help them, but in this district we’re very limited on our help and if you’re very limited on your help, they’re very limited on their time and so ...”

Participant 12. “Typically, whenever you put four or five students in one class for inclusion because you have another person, the class size gets way over like 24 or 25, 27, 28. And when it gets that large, it’s really difficult to try to keep tabs on what’s happening. It’s not necessarily the students that have the modifications, it’s the other students you are going to lose. You can try to keep them busy doing something, but when they realize that you’re focused on someone then you are focused on trying to get them doing something, they’re gone.”
Participant 13. “Well one issue that I have this year, one of my classes is inclusion and I have six special education students in there but I also have a total of 13 students in that class who have some kind of documentation, ESL {English Second Language}; (Section) 504, or special education of my 27 kids.”

Participant 14. “But even with five special education, I mean that’s putting a lot of needs kids in the one class but I’ve got that going on already, so I think we’re just … I mean we do the kids a disservice, like even the general kids by packing as many kids, packing classes to maximum capacity and expecting them to be able to function. It’s just it’s too much, too many personalities, too much noise, too many distractions, and then when you throw special education kids on top of it. It becomes that much more difficult.”

Limited training. This topic was discussed by six participants a total of 10 times. The following is a quote by one participant that refers to limited training provided to all staff:

Participant 4. “So, I wish that there was a way to make society more aware of what special education actually is. If there was a way to reduce the stigma associated with special education. And again, I don’t know the answer to that but I feel like if we can start here in the school and make other teachers aware that these kids deserve the same thing as everybody else. I think that will make a difference in the way teachers handle special education students sometimes I feel like teachers think that special education students are a burden and they shouldn’t be. They just need some different things than the other kids. I feel like spending more professional development time and making people more aware of what special education students need and just reiterating the fact that they are not any different than anybody else they want to be successful I think that would make a difference in society and kids overall would be more successful.”
Staff availability. Seven participants mentioned that there might not always be staff when they were needed. This was discussed 10 times and the following statement mentions the struggle with the availability of staff members and providing effective programming to students:

Participant 4. “You know it comes down to resources, do we have a teacher that can sacrifice that time in her schedule to teach a resource class. How do we work the kids’ schedules so that we can have all the kids that need resource in that one class because you know we’re figuring out the master schedule is a huge jigsaw puzzle so if we have one resource teacher and five resource kids or five kids that would qualify for a resource. How do we say one is a freshman, one sophomore and then we have three juniors how do we get them all into that program. If we were a larger school and we had more resources maybe we could make it work but because we’re small it would be very difficult.”

Limited time in class by inclusion staff. Although this topic could be related to the above issue of staff availability, it was mentioned specifically by four participants with seven comments. The following are two statements that mention concerns about how much time the inclusion staff were able to be in the classroom:

Participant 13. “I have two paraprofessionals or three paraprofessionals that I only see once a week and so I think that those would be less likely.” “Yeah, they rarely have any idea what’s even going on in the class because I see them one class on Friday and that’s the only time I ever see them. They just come when they can come, it’s not about when I need them. And I think, I mean it’s the day they’re scheduled to come, I mean it’s really it’s not about when I need them this year.”

Participant 14. “They don’t see them as often, if they get 30 minutes, three times a day then you have an entire day that they don’t get the support or you have maybe the most
important 15 minutes since we don’t get to decide ‘OK I need you here for this period of
time versus that period time’ so giving them 30 minutes of a 45 minute class or 30
minutes of an hour and a half a class that means that there’s still a large portion that they
don’t have the support that they might need.”

**Type of inclusion staff: co-teacher versus paraprofessional.** The next statements refer
to concerns about the type of inclusion staff available, which was referenced 18 times by nine
different participants:

*Participant 2.* “So yeah I have no problems with that I really like that co-teacher version
though where you have someone who knows the content, it gives you a break and they
teach and they teach it differently or say it differently and I get to go work with the kids
who are struggling.”

*Participant 4.* “So, if the co-teacher was certified in English, then I could probably
handle more kids at a time. If it’s somebody who’s just there for in-class support and
they’re just shortening assignments or reading things to the kids or providing you know
sentence starters or something. Then I would need fewer students in that class.”

*Participant 5.* “I don’t think it really affects the class but I think it works better when a
true co-teach is a true teacher.”

*Participant 6.* “OK so I go back to like what a true co-teaching model looks like. I feel
like that’s the most effective way to do this. But it depends on the environment and what
the students need. I have a pretty strong background, highly qualified in the sciences and
therefore my input into a lesson is probably stronger than maybe some of the other
inclusion teachers who have just had like a special education certification or however you
want to look at that, they may be limited to what their knowledge they already know.”
Participant 10. “So, co-teaching is actually the other person is in there for special education reasons but they’re actually teaching part of it, like I would teach a lesson and then the other teacher would teach the lesson too, like your equals and you spend the same amount teaching, like the kids see us both as teachers in class.” “The in-class support person just kind of monitors and helps where needed. They hit all kids in class still but they don’t ever get that teaching option I guess. They are just helping kids stay where they need to be or whatever help they need at that time.”

Participant 15. “It can be. I mean they know that they’re there for support, but I’ve also had an inclusion person who’s more of a distraction and kind of a riles up kids when trying to correct them.”

Inclusion staff has a lack of content knowledge. One barrier to inclusion that came up 32 times by 11 participants was the lack of content knowledge of inclusion staff. This was supported by the following comments:

Participant 4. “When you have a person in your classroom who is certified in that field it makes a difference because they can make a judgment call on what’s going to work well for a kid with that particular disability. So, I think that having that person in the classroom really makes a big difference on the overall success of the class.”

Participant 5. “So, I mean I guess that I think the co-teacher needs to have some background in that area for them to be beneficial, if not I mean to be honest with you I’ve worked with co-teachers … I’ve worked with the teachers that if they don’t know the subject is almost more work for me as a teacher to try and continue to tell them how to do things.”

Participant 14. “But if the inclusion teacher isn’t strong in the subject . . .”
Lack of collaboration between inclusion staff and general education teacher. The next statements mentioned concerns about communication or collaboration between teachers. This topic was referenced 22 times by 10 participants:

Participant 2. “I just think that teachers have to be more responsible now since they are in your class to just not ignore them, and make sure that they’re learning somehow, and there’s kids that you have to call on for extra help because they’re not doing anything, you know but I just think that they have to work with their co-teachers or their paraprofessionals and say ‘this is what I’m going to with them this day’, ‘this is what I need you do with them the next day’. I think just more working one-on-one or together rather instead of just saying ‘well the co-teacher will be in here Friday she’ll get them all caught up and that’s not going to happen.”

Participant 3. “I don’t feel like I get to do all of them, like if they have like you know short assignments it would be nice to do that before we get in but I usually don’t have the assignments before.”

Participant 6. “So, and again this also depended upon the relationship you have with that general education teacher and that the general teacher has with the students you know.”

Views of separate responsibility. Three separate participants commented seven times that some teachers viewed students as either a general education or a special education responsibility. This is explained in the following statements:

Participant 1. “Some of the teachers have the attitude that these are your students.”

Participant 2. “I just think a lot of teachers think if its special education, it’s not my problem and the co-teacher will handle everything. And that cannot be done, sometimes the co-teacher is not even in there every day, you know.”
**Participant 8.** “The flip of that is when I go into a classroom and the special education students are segregated, they’re all grouped together and it’s obvious that they’ve become the paraprofessional’s responsibility.”

**Ineffectiveness of substitutes for inclusion staff.** This topic was not directly asked about, but one participant felt that it was significant enough to mention with four references, (i.e., the general education teacher’s opinion about substitutes being used for inclusion staff):

**Participant 9.** “It can’t just be any sub, because some of these kids are not receptive to other people and they don’t feel comfortable ... I think they would be receptive to {name} I know they would be receptive to {name}, but others that it would be like oil and water.”

**How decisions are made.** The last comment showed one participant’s perception about how district decisions were made in regards to programming needs. This specific topic was only addressed with two references, but shows a special education teacher’s view:

**Participant 6.** “Because I think people higher up don’t know and don’t understand and they’re making decisions without being in the trenches with the rest of us … No, I know that we’re moving, our education in general is changing and therefore we have to keep up in the special education world as well. The push for least restrictive has been out there for a long time, and we are just now trying to start following suit with all of that. But even in our general education population there’s differences and so, in my opinion, not everybody is college bound and we shouldn’t treat them as such. And that’s the same thing for special education, there are some who need to learn life skills and training to be able to function in life. Then there’s others who are going to be able to do more. And I think having environments for them and providing them the tools that they need in order to do that whether it be academically or functionally or whatever, it is our job to do that.”
**Relationship between data and the research questions.** The data described above regarding district-level decisions support two of the subsequent research questions as follows: (a) What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful, and (b) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

**Theme: Programming depends on individual students.** As the successes and challenges of each setting were identified, a strong statement recurred, (i.e., it depends on the students). Table 7 shows the five different concepts that were immediately discussed before, during, or after the phrase that “it depends on the students.”

**Table 7**

*Programming Depends on Individual Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references related to topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic needs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of disability</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual choice for setting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At some point, each of the 16 participants stated, referred to, or directly commented that the students should be looked at individually and that decisions for determining the setting depended upon several factors directly related to the students including the type of disability, the impact of their behavior, their individual academic needs, the level of motivation and effort, and that the students should be given a choice for which setting they preferred. The academic needs of the students were mentioned the most with 21 references and the type of disability was second with
19 comments. The next two were the same with 10 references each for motivation and individual choice. The last topic was mentioned nine times and refers to behavior. Some quotes from the interviews to support this theme include:

**Participant 1.** “I think it’s good. I think it depends on the students, the special education students. Some of them have the attitude that they expect you to do everything for them and some of the teachers have the attitude that these are your students. Pull them out of the classroom to get the work done. Others work really well to try to collaborate on what’s going on.”

**Participant 5.** “But from that standpoint I think a lot of general education teachers just generally think all special education kids are lazy or they’re trying to find the easy way out, other than they really have ... I will admit there is probably one time in my life that I might have believed early on, until I know the sweetest kid that I’m thinking of right now, when I co-taught … and I say, five times in a row to him, ‘zero times one is zero, zero times two is zero, zero times three is zero, zero times four is …’, and he had no clue what the answer is, and this kid is the sweetest kid, works hard and gets so upset with himself and he would cry when he couldn’t get it. And so when you see that kid, to me the most extreme, and he will be successful in his life I think he wanted to be a youth pastor and I’m like ‘you know what, he generally cares, he’s going to be what he wants to be, this math has nothing to do with how he’s going to be successful and all it did, it actually made me feel bad numerous times because I did not know how to reach him in those general math areas with something so simple like that. To break it down, to write it down because maybe, I mean whether he had on paper, he said it, virtually so numerous ways, he just always struggled with math, his memory. I’m sure he had no memory.”
Participant 9. “Right. I think it’s a kid by kid, you can’t, it’s not a cookie cutter thing, you got to see you know if it’s just, it’s a delicate thing.”

Participant 12. “That depends on the student. If there’s a student that really doesn’t need a whole lot of modifications or accommodations, then that’s not a problem, but when you have a student who is extremely low, that has a lot of issues, then you need that person and support. It would depend on the student.”

Participant 13. “I think again that goes to back to the kid, the kid’s motivation. I think when a special education student is motivated and is trying in my class they generally are making progress, even if it’s not completely academically … my goal is to make sure that all my special education kids feel good about themselves and they feel like they can do it even if they’re not exactly at the level that I need them to be. I want them to know that I believe that they can do it and for them to have that faith in themselves. And so I think that I’ve seen, when a kid is willing to put in that work and are willing to try I have seen progress with my special education students. When that now they’re just shutting down they’re not going to do anything, that’s a completely different story.”

**Relationship between data and the research questions.** The data above regarding the theme of making decisions based on student needs was connected to the central research questions and the three subsequent questions: (a) Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? (b) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting? (c) What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education
students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful? (d) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

**Theme: Need for a combination of inclusion and specialized settings.** Once the successes and challenges of each setting were determined, the question of what the most appropriate setting for special education students that struggle with grade level curriculum was posed. When participants referred to special education settings, a variety of options were discussed. Table 8 shows data collected in relation to how often each of the various specialized settings, in order of most to least restrictive, were mentioned. Then, the participants came up with their own solutions, from which came one common theme. Figure 4 shows this common solution mentioned by 14 out of the 16 participants, (i.e., to create a programming option that combined general education inclusion and some type of specialized setting, most commonly referred to as resource or content mastery). Some participants described having both settings options separately, while others mentioned a combination of both settings for each student.

**Table 8**

*Specialized Settings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Special Educator</th>
<th>General Educator</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total number of references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive behavior</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content mastery</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull-outs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the specialized settings, resource was mentioned the most with 70 references and using pull-outs was in second place with 51 comments. As defined earlier, a pull-out is a special education setting anytime a student is removed from a general education environment. The next most discussed options were content mastery with 24 references and adaptive behavior with 22
references. The setting least mentioned was life skills; however, many of the participants had little to no experience with this option but understand that it was available.

Figure 4

Need for a Combination of Inclusion and Specialized Settings

The following statements support the idea that both inclusion and a separate setting of some type are needed:

*Participant 2.* “It depends on the student. I have some that underachieve because they know that they’re not responsible for every single grade, and then you have some that it is way too hard for them, where if we can get them to graph a line I’m really excited. I don’t care if they can’t shade where is greater than or less than. Or if we can get them to do the whole lesson they may not remember the next day. You know so it depends on the kid, it’s a yes and no thing. Some of them that’s way too hard, I don’t want to use names … they could do a lot more … Because they used to have resource one and two, which is like a lot of, you know we don’t have that, for a lot of them, there’s no more resource
classes for them and they need those. I hate that we took those out because that allowed them to do maybe a couple years of resource, then come do algebra 1 and math models. So, they were pretty much doing algebra one for three years. Now they have to do it in one year and go on to geometry or something or math models but still you know.”

Participant 3. “Now that everyone is taking STAAR and everyone is required to like get all the content, knowing what our resource class was like, I think that it wouldn’t have necessarily been beneficial to them because they would not have been at least-exposed to all the concepts. At least at this point the one student I think that should maybe could have been in resource because he was just that low, he was also in our learning lab class. So, I was able to help him a little bit in the class but also help him like outside of class so I think that was kind of better set up than actual resource.” “I mean I feel like a lot, like really 95% of my students can be successful in a general education class with you know the accommodations and the support of the extra teacher in there and things like that. But there is that you know other 5% that I just feel like it’s not going to be successful in there and so a resource class of some sort would be beneficial for those students but it’s a very small amount. But I guess you have to you know have whatever they need to be successful right.”

Participant 4. “So, there’s a couple students in particular that would really benefit from resource. Because they’re just not on the same level as other kids there I mean. I’ve had students before that really needed a heavily modified curriculum but they, they are certainly not what would be considered life skill students. They’re not quite there, they can participate in class and they can do, you know, the basic things that they can read and they can write and those kinds of things but they need a heavily modified curriculum
where it’s more focused on what their needs are and can move at their pace.”

*Participant 5.* “If you were to ask them questions I go back to that, asking them questions I would definitely say ask what classroom they would prefer to be in. We can’t really say, but I guess you could say, it wouldn’t be politically correct … but do you prefer to be with the kids that aren’t as smart or would you rather be with the kids that are smart. Would you rather a smaller group size with a teacher, would you rather work with a teacher and someone else who could come around and help you with the co-teacher. I guess you could look at past history, what worked or not worked so if the kid has been say resource previously and still struggling majorly, hey maybe we should say ‘look you tried resource, you really didn’t get the material when they were working with say six students, we want to try inclusion and see how that works. What else could you look at … I mean I feel like that’s a history of what works and ask the kid what they would prefer, but like I said I mean.” “For sure so like I said you know it’s all based off the kid. It almost needs to be individual and I would think he would probably have preferred to be in a resource class no doubt he had preferred.”

*Participant 6.* “I don’t think full time, no. There was definitely appropriate times and there was times that I did and they would get so frustrated with it you know and we’re in the classroom and I’m trying to help them reach whatever the you know expectation was that we had for them, which was not the same as what everybody else had, and they still weren’t getting there and they are moving on to something else. And the kids I’m working with are ready to pack up and move on to the next thing and I have to say ‘no, we’ve got to do this, we’ve got to finish this’. It’s almost like you have to do step one before you get to step two. In which case yes it would definitely benefit them to be there,
but I don’t think a true resource room where they are scheduled into and that’s where they have to go every day, all the time, is the answer. I think that’s … I think we’re stepping backwards by doing that. But having a support room where they can go maybe it’s, maybe if you don’t want to take them out of let’s say they biology third period and you don’t want to take them out of there OK, but they still they didn’t quite get it. Maybe having something imbedded in their day where there’s a support period sixth period. By the time the sixth period this person says ‘hey they didn’t quite get this, this is what we’re going over.’ It needs to have re-teach happen in sixth period over that.”

Participant 7. “I honestly think it’s great for some of the classes so maybe they might be comfortable but if you’ve got a student who really struggles in math and just does not get it at all and doesn’t even get the concept of adding two numbers together, trying to put them in a geometry or algebra class in general education you’re just going to get more behaviors than you’re going to get anything. So, I don’t think it’s for everybody, I think it should be a pick and choose. OK you know they’re really good into reading, they like listening to stories, so we’re going to stick this one in history. And this one does really good in math and they can get it so maybe we will start there with them, but to stick them all out there I think it’s a disaster waiting to happen.” “Yeah, more of a revolving door I guess. Where even though this is what we want it to be it doesn’t have to be that every single day. It needs to be more for that flexibility.”

Participant 8. “I think a general education setting is the best setting when the appropriate supports are provided for the individual. And then I think it’s kind of a declining tier at that point in time. You know whether it’s a co-teach classroom or paraprofessional in the classroom, I think that’s kind of your next level, and then I think it’s you know pulling
that student out periodically you know at the absolute minimum and then you’re going to fall on down to a self-contained type setting for maybe a specific course.”

Participant 11. “But I mean I really think they need to be in there, but at the same time … they need something they need different explanations.” “What I would recommend … I don’t know if there’s anything down there about it being different—is that I think that the kids need to be there for the lesson and to hear everything but then once it’s time for them to work on their own I think they need to be brought out so that it can be retaught. And so, once the lesson is taught, once the lesson is over, once their notes are taken, they should be able to come out. Like the kids that can do it on their own can stay in there. But if they’re the ones that are far behind they will listen to it and then they need somebody else to re-explain it to them and sometimes if you have a lot of kids that are inclusion support in different areas of the classroom they’re not all together so they’re not all there for the re-teach, or you end up saying it three or four different times at different parts of the room and it’s kind of a kind of waste a lot of the time that you could be actually helping them with the problems but instead you’re re-explaining it here and re-explaining it there because you don’t you can’t just group them all together unless you pull them out, so otherwise it’s not fair and it kind of pinpoints them.”

Participant 14. “Well doing a special education setting over-all kind of detracts from what the true goal is and that’s to get them back on level and so I think it would be better for them to have a general education class and the support class where they could do more. Do more to fill in the gaps that they’re missing and so that would be a really good use of a resource class.”
Participant 15. “I think it would help because it goes back to that small group learning environment maybe not every day, but once a week or something...So I think that it should just be a part of the class that they’re enrolled in and maybe make it optional if they want to go once a week so that if they’re behind on something they could go to catch up. Or just get extra instruction from somebody else because sometimes somebody else can say it a different way and they get it.”

Participant 16. “No, I think they need it, you know, in case they want to use it, but you know I don’t think it’s bad.”

Relationship between data and the research questions. The data above about the theme of combining both settings is connected to the central research questions and the three subsequent questions: (a) Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? (b) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting? (c) What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful? (d) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings?

Role of the Researcher

I have ten years’ experience working with secondary age special education students in various settings: as a general education elective teacher; as an inclusion co-teacher in several subjects; as a resource teacher for English, Mathematics, and Technology classes; as an adaptive behavior teacher; as a special education case manager; and as a transition coordinator working with functional life skills students in vocational settings. I work in the same district where the
research was conducted and have provided special education case management training and support to teachers but I am not a supervisor. My goal is to make better programming decisions for students with special needs to help prepare them for the future by providing the LRE necessary for improving academic progress and facilitating success.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the individual experiences and perceptions of teachers of students in special education to have a greater understanding of where academic progress is most evident. The central research question was: Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? This was supported by the subsequent questions about providing significant accommodations and modifications, whether appropriate support is being provided, and what the overall challenges of inclusion are. The sample of participants included 10 general education teachers and six special education teachers certified and currently employed in a public school district in Texas. A purposive sampling method (Palys, 2008) ensured that all participants could provide information related to the central phenomenon.

Data analysis consisted of various organizational strategies for qualitative data including an initial categorization for broad areas into challenges within an inclusive setting, successes within an inclusive setting, challenges within a special education setting, and successes within a special education setting. These categories led to identification of themes including behavior interfering with teaching, student’s academic progress with content, need for socialization, district-level concerns, programming depends on individual students, and the need for inclusive and special settings. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the results, limitations or
implications determined by the research, as well as conclusions and recommendations for further studies.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Once students become eligible for special education services, the task of determining an appropriate placement and programming of where students will receive their instruction begins. Many factors should be considered, although the goal in any educational system is for students to learn. Learning is gauged in many ways including state assessments and overall academic progress. Because of the nature of the range of disabilities, progress can be difficult to measure with quantitative methods only. Therefore, a qualitative method based on the perceptions of teachers regarding students’ progress and success is required. Although this has been an ongoing concern, there is limited data to support how programming options are determined even though IDEA requires that LRE be considered (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Much of the existing literature mentions considerations such as type of disability (Lyons et al., 2016), behavior (Eller et al., 2016), and socialization (Naraian, 2011); however, very little research has been undertaken where academic success is the reason for a specific setting (Ford, 2013).

The purpose of the present phenomenological case study was to examine teacher perceptions to determine whether special education students should be educated in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes. This qualitative approach enabled individual teacher’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to be studied and compared to other teachers’ opinions, to determine whether special education students are showing academic progress, and what things to take into consideration when deciding the best placement for a special education student. Chapter 5 will summarize and discuss the overall results and how the current literature relates to the data obtained from the present study. In addition, Chapter 5 will discuss the limitations of the study, implications from the results, and provide recommendations for further research.
Summary of the Results

The primary focus of the present study was to determine appropriate academic settings based on the academic progress of special education students. The existing literature is comprehensive in addressing the different topics within special education. However, there is limited focus on using academic success as the main determinant in programming decisions based on placement of students with special needs within general education or special education settings (Wilson et al., 2011). The majority of studies dealing with special education tend to focus on the social (Feldman et al., 2016) and behavioral needs (Mattison & Blader, 2013), as well as on how to improve the co-teaching environment (Murawski, 2012). Many of these studies do not specify academics as a factor. In the studies that do mention academic progress, the amount of data is limited in that each study has a main topic such as elementary aged students (McLeskey et al. 2012), one academic area such as math or reading (Scanlon & Baker, 2012), or a specific disability such as an intellectual disability or autism (Browder et al., 2009).

Data for the present study was collected using a qualitative, semi-structured interview method in which secondary level public education teachers were questioned about their perceptions of teaching special education students. Both general education and special education certified teachers were asked to describe their experiences with teaching special education students either in an inclusive environment or in a special education setting. The majority of the participants felt that the general education inclusive environment was best for most students with special needs; at the same time, many participants believed that a special education setting of some type was necessary to provide appropriate instruction. It was agreed that even though there may only be a small percentage of students, there are some that would benefit from a special education setting such as the resource setting. When directly asked which setting participants
felt was best for students on a modified curriculum to show academic progress, many of the participants agreed that a combination of general education inclusion and special education would be most beneficial. A general education classroom environment is necessary for all students to learn and have AGC; however, those students that have higher needs and are on a modified curriculum still require a special education environment. Many participants stated that the special education setting works best in addition to the general education inclusion class, either in the form of a content mastery class or more time in a specialized pull-out setting.

The most discussed concern about having special education students in a general education inclusive classroom was related to behavior. Even when questions were focused on academic progress, teachers had difficulty keeping behavior out of the discussion. Several teachers mentioned an adaptive behavior program and how it was successful for some students, but not for all behavioral issues. Participants stated that if the adaptive behavior program was not working appropriately, then most teachers suggested that the students need to be removed from the general education environment altogether. The adaptive behavior teacher also agreed that it was sometimes necessary to self-contain the more difficult behavior students. Most of the behavioral concerns mentioned were not about students in the adaptive behavior program, but other students that lacked motivation or simply did not care about their education. These students became distractions within the inclusion setting and interfered with teaching.

The amount of academic success was difficult for most teachers to measure; however, most felt that any amount of success was reason enough to keep special education students in the general education inclusive classroom and that behavior would be the only reason to remove them. Special education teachers and dual certified teachers agreed that the one main concern with a separate resource class was also the behavior of students, especially when they were all
grouped together. The best option would be for students with special needs to receive their instruction in the general education classroom and then receive an additional intervention within a special education setting such as content mastery.

Simply stated, all students deserve the same opportunities as each other, even those with limited academic ability, but there is still a need for some students to receive additional instruction in a separate setting to be successful. There were various examples provided on how this could be achieved, with many participants describing a combination of general education and special education settings. Besides academics, the only other main concern was behavior, specifically when behavior impeded the learning of others, which required some type of removal of those with the disruptive behavior from the general education environment.

**Discussion of the Results**

The original basis for this research and the phenomenological connection among the teachers was that the district in the study had limited the availability of all programming options. What was considered a resource class and was previously offered in place of general education content areas had been removed. Content mastery, used as a type of resource setting, was also removed. With resource classes no longer offered as an option, all students were being placed in general education inclusive settings, regardless of their academic ability. The only other option for students with a high-level of need, or on modified curriculum, was to go into a completely self-contained life skills setting, which should be reserved for students on an alternative curriculum. This left out an entire group of special education students that were higher functioning than life skills but were of below average intelligence and required a lot more supports with modified curriculum. When asked about reasons that students should be in general education inclusion, another factor the participants mentioned was the need for socialization,
which included special education students integrating with their non-disabled peers as well as general education students learning how assimilate with differently abled peers. Another more common theme that emerged was that programming options depended on individual students and should be looked at on an individual basis for many reasons, including what the student themselves preferred. The following is a more detailed description of each theme that the research revealed.

**Connections between Themes and Research Questions**

The findings from the study are summarized in the six themes that emerged: (a) behavior interfering with teaching, (b) student’s academic progress with content, (c) programming depends on individual needs, (d) need for socialization, (e) district-level concerns, and (f) need for a combination of inclusive and special settings. This section will describe how these themes reference the central research question, as well as the subsequent research questions.

**Central research question.** Based on teacher perceptions, do students with special needs show the most academic success in general education inclusion classes or special education resource classes? The themes related to this question were (a) student’s academic progress with content, (b) programming depends on individual needs, and (c) need for a combination of inclusive and special settings. The answer to this question is not precise due to the variance in teacher responses. General education teachers believe that all students are making academic progress while special education and dual certified teachers understand that academic progress is dependent upon the accommodations and modifications being provided; therefore, if these factors are not being provided appropriately, then academic success is limited. Instead of a direct answer, the data suggests that the only way for academic success to occur is by providing a combination of general education inclusion and a separate special education
setting for the students that need it. This should continue to be undertaken on a more individual basis and all options within the continuum of services should be available.

**Subsequent research question 1.** What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of special education students with significant accommodations and modifications in a general education setting? The themes that related to this question were (a) behavior interfering with teaching, (b) need for socialization, (c) programming depends on individual needs, and (d) need for a combination of inclusive and special settings. The overall perceptions of teachers were mostly positive; however, there were some significant concerns, such as whether some high-needs students even needed the content areas that they were required to be in and whether it was a good use of their time to take classes such as algebra or geometry or chemistry. Knowing that state guidelines must still be met, many teachers agreed that supports from a special education teacher or paraprofessional was necessary for the success of students with special needs in a general education classroom and that more one-on-one or small group time was more beneficial for their academic success. Such supports can be difficult to provide in a general education inclusive setting, which is why the suggestion of a special education class in addition to the general education setting was stated as the preferred option by 14 out of the 16 participants. Once again, the options for how to provide this should be on an individual basis after looking at many factors.

**Subsequent research question 2.** What are the perceptions of teachers as to whether special education students in general education classes receive the supports they need to be successful? The themes that related to this question were (a) student’s academic progress with content, (b) district-level concerns, (c) programming depends on individual needs, and (d) need for a combination of inclusive and special settings. Many teachers believe that special education
students are receiving beneficial supports but that more support is needed. Some teachers stated that they were not allowed the flexibility of working with students one-on-one or in a small group as much as is required. Some teachers stated that it was difficult to provide appropriate modifications within a general education environment. Some special education teachers stated that they were not providing enough supports owing to the pace of the class or the limited ability to access the curriculum to know how to accommodate and modify appropriately. Some special education teachers believe that general education teachers were not trained enough to provide appropriate modifications on their own. Many general education teachers believe that the only reason special education students are successful is due to support provided by the inclusion staff.

**Subsequent research question 3.** What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the day-to-day challenges of inclusive settings? The themes that related to this question were (a) behavior interfering with teaching, (b) need for socialization, (c) district-level concerns, (d) programming depends on individual needs, and (e) need for a combination of inclusive and special settings. Many different challenges were identified when discussing inclusive settings, several of which were discussed so often they became themes as described above. The most discussed challenge was dealing with behavior because disruptive behavior influences the entire class and impedes learning. Some teachers even mentioned that there needs to be more supports or intervention provided by administration to help appropriately deal with poorly behaved students. Another challenge was providing the appropriate support by specifically being able to give enough attention and re-teaching to students, which is very difficult to achieve in a classroom of 30+ students.

Several other challenges were discussed that combined into the theme of district-level concerns, the most common of which was class size. Many teachers believe that general
education inclusion would be more successful if overall class sizes were smaller because the trend appears to be that because it is an inclusion class with two teachers, more students could be placed into the classroom, which creates problems. Many times, inclusion classes end up being larger than regular general education classes. The concern of class size is related to another challenge, which is the number of special education students per class. As the number of special education students increases, so does the overall class size. These challenges make it very difficult to provide the support needed for all students and general education students also suffer when the needs of the special education students appear more important. At the same time, the inclusion staff felt as though they could not support all students when they were expected to assist both special education and general education students, even though legally they were there for the special education students. Another district-level challenge was the limited training provided to teachers, especially regarding how to make inclusion classes successful and how to provide appropriate accommodations and modifications. Both groups of teachers felt that additional training was necessary, which leads to another challenge—the design of the inclusive classroom. Many teachers believe that a true co-teach with a certified special education teacher providing the supports would be more beneficial than if a paraprofessional was providing the supports. This is for many reasons, with two of the most common being lack of content knowledge and limited amount of time that the inclusion teachers were able to be in the general education classroom with the students.

**Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature**

Much of the existing literature focuses on multiple areas that affect special education students. There were limited studies showing academic progress as the sole reason for deciding programming options. The present study supports the need for additional research to ensure that
students with special needs are being placed based on academic needs and not on behavioral or social aspects.

Additional research about the influence of each setting specific to the academic success of students has been identified as requiring more in-depth studies. The existing studies are inadequate because they discuss additional factors that diminish the academic achievement of student outcomes. Current research raises more questions as to where students show more academic success and progress, and how programming decisions for students with disabilities are made when there are limited options available. The factors that occur in the research and further complicate the results include characteristics such as age or grade level (McLeskey et al., 2012), type of disability (Lyons et al., 2016), placement options, location of study (Arduin, 2015), and significance of disability (Ruppar, 2015). There is a minimal amount of current research that includes the perceptions of parents and students. There is some research that includes educator perception (Berry, 2010); nonetheless, this data does not distinguish between the academic successes of students with disabilities in a general education and a special education environment. The focus needs to be on academic success, thus educators would be the logical place to start when collecting data. Understanding how teachers perceive the current processes and programming options available is necessary and a constructive follow-up study would be to include the perceptions of students and parents’ also.

When the most important factor of academic success is questioned, students with special needs are still being placed into settings based on non-educational factors including funding (Kurth, 2015) and improved socialization (Feldman et al., 2016). There is limited research that undeniably states which setting is best for academic success of students with severe learning disabilities. Students with disabilities need accommodations and modifications that significantly
influence the level at which these students learn and retain information (Lee et al., 2010). In the
general education classroom, it has been shown that students with special needs are continually
having difficulty (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011); however, other studies have shown that
special education classes are not always suitable either (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011b). All
students in special education need to have the option of appropriate settings that range from full
inclusion to specialized environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Some school
districts have removed or reduced some of the settings options, specifically the resource setting
and replaced it with the inclusion setting, even though there is little proof as to what is most
effective setting for the academic progress for students with special needs.

**Limitations**

As with all research studies, there are several limitations in the present study that must be
explained. Qualitative studies in general are based on perception and since all people are
different, it is difficult to generalize perceptions from 16 teachers to an entire population. The
focus of the present study was academic success, which can be an objective opinion; therefore,
there is support for adding in numerical values such as grades or test scores to improve the data
obtained from the study. Thus, it would be beneficial to look at quantitative data also. Another
limitation is the size of the study. Qualitative data is time-consuming and is only undertaken
with a small number of subjects. Additional studies with various school districts would be
beneficial to investigate and contrast perceptions across the state. The scope of the present
research is limited to the perceptions of teachers, whereas another focus of further research could
be to include administrator views, more teachers, parents, and the students themselves.
Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The results from the present study confirm that educators want all students to be successful; however, teachers have difficulty ensuring the success of special education students without additional staff. Even though general education is the best setting for the majority of students with special needs, it is still believed that some students would benefit from a separate special education setting. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) implemented laws for LRE and specified a continuum of service options for these exact reasons; therefore, districts should be required to provide all options necessary for every student to be successful. Conversely, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 emphasizes increased certifications of special education teachers and has made it difficult to provide the programming settings needed, specifically resource classes. Limited funding available to districts has also made it difficult to hire the appropriate staff to provide such an individualized program for all special education students (Banks et al., 2015). Thus, the strict certification requirements, previously known as ‘highly qualified,’ and the allocation of special education funds, including how they are applied to student needs, should be researched further in the future.

Many times, the decision for which setting to place students with special needs is arbitrary and is based on what the parents and students want or even on administrative concerns due to staffing limitations. Even with specific laws, districts can interpret these laws in the way that the people within the district believe is the best. Until additional and specific case law is passed, there may never be an exact answer to where a student must be educated because there are simply too many factors involved. There will always be some students who must begin their education in a specialized setting; however, the expectation of integrating back into general
education should be considered as the student progresses. Special education settings should not be final (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

Many students, including the students with special needs that the present study focused on, should start in a general education setting. Then, as the students’ needs increase, the options for settings might need to be reconsidered. Special education should be an individualized program using the continuum of services to guide decision makers with flexibility and movement expected (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Since the law allows room for interpretation, some districts unintentionally provide only what they believe they can. It is very difficult to hear, “Well I know it would be better for the student if we did that … But we just don’t have the staff or the money and we will have to do the best we can.” Statements like this are the reason why the resource setting, or other specialized settings, have been removed as programming options in some districts.

Based on my opinion and justified by the phenomenological case study, all the options within the continuum of services are there for a reason and none of them should be excluded. If the district is not large enough to rationalize offering each of the services, then adjustments should be made with every effort possible so that each student is successful (Eller et al., 2016). I believe that the responses of both general educators and special educators are on the right track. The majority of students should begin their education in a general education setting and then slowly add in supports and, when necessary, start being provided with separate special education environments. It is in the best interest of the students with special needs to do whatever is necessary to keep these students in a general education setting as much of the day as possible. By including appropriate adaptive behavior and social skills programs, with a combination of resource or content mastery settings, most special education students will be successful in a
general education classroom even if only for part of the day (Lyons et al., 2016). It is understood that students with high needs will need some type of specialized setting due to the nature and the level of the curriculum that cannot be adjusted within a general education setting. Only then should the student be removed and this can be done daily or for specific classes. At the secondary level, it is imperative that this happens in all subject areas, including electives. By reintroducing resource and content mastery settings and increasing the use of the pull-out method, students with special needs can obtain the grade level instruction required, while also benefiting from specialized instruction. Instead of making decisions based on a diagnosis and expecting that students with special needs be exclusively in one setting all day, it is logical to create several combinations of setting options to meet individual needs.

Eventually, all students will leave the protection of the education system and go out into the world (Tomlinson, 2015). If school districts continue to remove students with special needs from the general education classroom setting, how will these students ever learn to adapt and be successful after graduation? Many educators are doing students with special needs a huge disservice by thinking of removal instead of addressing the underlying behavior that is preventing these students from staying in the general education setting. Additionally, it is harmful when certain specialized setting options are completely removed when these settings are clearly needed for some students with special needs’ academic progress.

It is the administration’s responsibility to provide the very best education for every single student, regardless of the level of need. The initial focus should be on increasing behavioral staff and improving campus-wide behavioral programs that will address behavioral needs of both special education and general education students. Concentrating on behavior will invariably lead to teachers’ feeling more supported, so that teachers can provide appropriate
education to all students, including special education students with behavioral and cognitive needs. By creating a program that uses a combination of general education and special education staff, all districts, regardless of size, should be able to determine an appropriate placement option for every student on an individual basis.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the most important recommendations of further research is to understand true academic progress. One way to achieve this would be to take a representative sample of special education students and compile data based on various factors using a quantitative approach where state assessment scores as well as numerical grade data are collected. This data should be collected in both general education and specialized settings with the same group of students to investigate and contrast any differences. While this group of students are in each setting it would be beneficial to then perform a qualitative study where the teachers are interviewed about specific students and their perceptions of academic progress. Another layer to the research would be to interview parents and students themselves. Therefore, an in-depth mixed method study of a specific group of special education students would be the best way to obtain more definitive data. Preferably, this future study would be completed within several different districts to add another layer of comparison. This type of study is much more involved due to the nature of including minors and a certain amount of personal data must be obtained that is specific to the participants, which could create some challenges but would not be impossible.

**Conclusion**

The present study explored the thoughts and perceptions of teachers working with special education students to better understand which environment is better for the academic success of such students. The programming options most often offered by school districts are general
education inclusion or a separate resource setting, yet there is a limited amount of research showing justification for a setting based on academic progress.

The results obtained in the present study provide a greater understanding of teacher perceptions in both environments. It contributes important data to the existing literature base with academic progress being the main determinant when making programming decisions for special education students. These findings may provide necessary information for school personnel to use when deciding which programming options to offer, determining where special education students will receive their instruction, and understanding the type of special education supports that are most beneficial and necessary to the students’ success. Ideally, the present study will also support future research in special education needs as an ongoing topic that should be studied regularly as the laws and expectations change.
References


cupdx.idm.oclc.org/docview/1737519210?accountid=10248

cupdx.idm.oclc.org/docview/195184961?accountid=10248


Appendix A: Research Questions for Individual Interviews

With General Education Teachers

Name: ____________________________ Length of time employed by district: ____________________________

Current position and content area:

1. Approximately how many Special education students do you have in each of your classes? Do you feel like the number of special education students in each class has an effect on the overall success of the students? Explain.

2. What are some successes and challenges that you have experienced recently in your classes?

3. Can you explain some of the accommodations and modifications you provide for the students?

4. For the students that are on a modified curriculum do you feel like they are able to understand the material taught in your class? Explain.

5. Do you have an inclusion teacher or paraprofessional in any of your classes? If so, do you think having an inclusion teacher is an effective way of providing accommodations/modifications for the students?

6. What are your perceptions of student learning utilizing small group instruction? Please elaborate.

7. Do you adapt how you grade the modified students? Do the grades accurately reflect their ability or level of achievement?

8. What are your perceptions of special education student’s progress in the inclusive setting? What evidence indicates success or failure?

9. Do you remember when the district offered resource classes for the modified special education students? Can you tell me about your experiences with classes and special education students at that time?

10. Why do you think the district has made adjustments to the delivery model for special education, including inclusive settings and resource classes? Explain.

11. Do you enjoy teaching the inclusion classes? Do you prefer them with or without inclusion teachers? Why or Why not?

12. What are your perceptions of the impact of inclusion on general education students? Explain.

13. What do you believe is the best educational setting for the higher need modified students? Explain.

14. If you were on an ARD committee, what information would you use to determine where students should receive their education?

15. Is there anything else you would like to include about your experiences teaching special education students and the impact of the educational setting?
Appendix B: Research Questions for Individual Interviews

With Special Education Teachers

Name: ___________________________ Length of time employed by district: ___________________________

Current position and teaching areas:

1. What are your perceptions of teaching in inclusion classes? Why or Why not?
2. Can you give some examples of what you do in an inclusion class?
3. Approximately how many Special education students do you currently have in each class? Do you feel like the number of special education students in each class has an effect on the overall success of the class? Explain.
4. How do you determine what each student needs when referring to accommodations and modifications? Please explain some of the specific things you do for the students.
5. Do you feel like you are able to adequately support the students in the general education setting? What evidence can you give?
6. Approximately how much time per class is spent re-teaching? Do you provide that in the classroom or another location?
7. Do you ever feel like you need to pull students out of the class in order to provide re-teaching or other modifications/accommodations? Explain how often and why you need to remove some students.
8. For students that are on a modified curriculum, what are your perceptions for whether or not they are able to understand the material in the general education classes? Explain.
9. Do you think the grades that special education students receive in inclusive classes are accurate to their ability or level of achievement?
10. What are your perceptions regarding your effectiveness as an inclusion teacher in providing accommodations or modifications for the students? Explain.
11. What are your perceptions about how special education students progress in the inclusive setting? What indicators do you use to determine this?
12. Do you think you would be better able to provide the necessary accommodations and modifications in a separate setting? Why or why not?
13. Have you ever taught a resource class for special education students? Can you tell me about your experiences with the classes and the special education students at that time? How is it different than your experiences in an inclusion class setting?
14. What are your perceptions of the impact of the inclusive classroom on general education students? Explain.
15. Is there anything else you would like to include about teaching special education students and the educational setting?
Appendix C: Informed Consent

**Research Study Title:** General Education Inclusion or Special Education Resource: A Study of Teacher Perceptions of the Impact of Placement Decisions on Academic Growth

**Principal Investigator:** Casey Story  
**Research Institution:** Concordia University, Portland, OR  
**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Brandy Kamm

**Purpose and what you will be doing:**
The purpose of this research study is to explore teacher perceptions about their experiences working with students in special education. The information will assist educators when making future decisions about programming options for students with special needs. This is a qualitative study collecting data through interviews. We expect approximately 20 volunteers. One group of 10 will consist of general education teachers and the other group of 10 will consist of special education teachers. There will not be compensation for participation in the study. The duration of the study will be approximately three months. To be in the study, you will participate in a one-to-one interview with both structured questions and potential follow-up questions. The questions will focus on your personal experiences related to teaching students with special needs. The general education teachers will be asked to describe their thoughts on academic success and failures, teacher perception of effectiveness and whether you feel knowledgeable about how to provide accommodations and modifications. The special education teachers will be asked questions about their experiences teaching students with special needs in inclusive settings, as well as specialized settings such as pull-outs and resource classes. You will be asked to discuss in which setting you feel the students showed the most academic growth. The interviews will be recorded using an audio device and electronically transcribed. The interview should take less than an hour of your time and will be completed in one meeting.

**Risks and Publication:**
There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect any personal information you provide, which will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption. When we look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. We will refer to your data with a code that only the principal investigator knows links to you. This way, your identifiable information will not be stored with the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report; however, the results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.
**Benefits:**
Information you provide will help make decisions about future programming for students with special needs. You can assist with this by providing detailed information with honest opinions and thorough descriptions.

**Confidentiality:**
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

**Right to Withdraw:**
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**
You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk contact the principal investigator, Casey Story at [Researcher phone redacted] or email [Researcher email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_______________________________                   ___________
Participant Name                               Date

_______________________________                   ___________
Participant Signature                         Date

Casey Story
Investigator Name                               Date

_______________________________                   ___________
Investigator Signature                         Date

Investigator: Casey Story; email: [Researcher email redacted]
c/o: Professor Dr. Brandy Kamm;
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon 97221
Appendix D: Permissions Letter to Conduct Research

November 8, 2016

Dr.
Superintendent, ISD
Address
RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study in ISD

Dear Dr.:

I am requesting permission to conduct a research study in ISD. I am currently enrolled in the online Doctor of Education program at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon and I am in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. The study is titled *Placement Decisions for Students with Special Needs: Which setting promotes more academic growth, General Education Inclusion or Special Education Resource?*

I am asking for permission to interview 20 teachers from the secondary level that have been employed in ISD for five years or longer. Additional selection criteria will focus on special education teachers that have worked with students in both a resource setting and a general education inclusion setting, and general education teachers that have worked with special education students in their classrooms, with inclusion support. If approval is granted, teacher participants will be interviewed individually on their campus, either during a conference period or after school. There will not be a disruption to their instructional schedules. The individual interviews should take approximately 45 minutes and no costs will be incurred by either the school district or the participants. The interviews will take place in the spring semester of 2017.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you agree to allow the study, please sign below to acknowledge your understanding and acceptance. You may contact me at (email) if you need additional information.

I appreciate your time and attention to this request and hope to have your support.

Sincerely,
Casey Reed Story

cc: Dr. Brandy Kamm, Concordia University

Approved by:

___________________________  ______________________  ___________
Printed Name and Title    Signature    Date
Appendix E: Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

---

Digital Signature

Casey Reed Story

Name (Typed)

March 28, 2018

Date