WORKING TOWARD "ACHIEVEMENT": KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROVIDING ACCESS TO EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY LABELS

by

Kyle William Resch

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ABSTRACT

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Kyle William Resch

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Nancy Rice

School personnel are accountable for the academic "achievement" of students with and without disability labels (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). In Wisconsin, "achievement" is measured via performance on standardized academic assessments (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [DPI], 2019). The use of these assessments privileges White middle-class students without disability labels (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Outcomes have been used to shame schools' so-called poor performance while ignoring other indicators of success such as instilling real-world problem-solving skills, building positive learning communities, using a critical lens, and engaging in social activism (Connor et al., 2019).

Many students with disability labels now receive instruction in the general education environment for most of the school day (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Standardized assessments show that academic "achievement" gaps persist and fail as indicators for "achievement." Placement of students in general education environments alone does not guarantee equitable access to learning opportunities (NCES, 2018). Personal experiences and beliefs of educators impact their teaching practices; therefore, their views may impact how they define "achievement" and provide access to equitable learning opportunities (Connor, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to examine how school leaders and educators at two high schools perceived “achievement” and to explore factors they considered when developing individualized supports for students with disability labels. Both schools were selected due to showing progress in increasing student “achievement” for students with disability labels.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and observations of planning meetings in schools. Through data analysis, I identified the following themes: 1) foundational beliefs of personnel regarding who can achieve and how they define “achievement”; 2) processes used to support students and teachers; and 3) understanding of inequities and steps taken (or not) towards providing equitable access to opportunities.

Implications include: engaging in conversations about institutional racism, encouraging teacher leadership and empowerment; working with families, parents, and the community; focusing on racial equity via professional development, equity audits, and the use of a racial equity process in decision-making; and restructuring the state report card. The findings contribute to the literature supporting high school restructuring designed to meet the needs of all learners.

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For my family:

Thank you for your endless love, encouragement, and support.

Chulo, thank you for being my four-legged writing companion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .... **II**

LIST OF FIGURES .... **VIII**

LIST OF TABLES .... **IX**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **X**

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION **1**

PROBLEM STATEMENT 3
STUDY PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS 5
RELATIONSHIP TO THE STUDY 6
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY 9
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS 11

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE **13**

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW 13
HISTORICAL VIEWS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY LABELS 15
Medical Model of Disability 16
Social Model of Disability 19
THE PLACEMENT CONTINUUM AND SERVING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY LABELS 21
Educating Students with Disability Labels in Separate Environments 24
Shift Towards General Education Placement 25
Co-Teaching to Support General Education Placement 27
Shift Towards Inclusive Education 29
CONTINUED EXISTENCE OF "ACHIEVEMENT GAPS" 33
WHAT BARRIERS DO SCHOOL PERSONNEL NEED TO ADDRESS TO INCREASE STUDENT "ACHIEVEMENT"? 38
Lack of Equity-Based Professional Development 40
Deficit-Based Beliefs Focused on Student Inability 42
Lack of a Strong School Support Structure 45
Lack of Sustained Equity Conversations in Schools 48
Lack of School-Community Partnerships 54
WHAT STRUCTURES SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY LABELS? 56
Professional Development to Service All Learners 56
Developing Assets-Based Beliefs 59
Developing School-Based Support Structure 63
Development of School-Community Partnerships 65
ARGUMENT FOR FURTHER RESEARCH 68

CHAPTER III: METHODS **70**

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 70
RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH DESIGN 72
Semi-Structured Interviews 73
Observations 74
RESEARCH QUESTIONS 76
POSITIONALITY 76
TRUSTWORTHINESS 85
SITE SELECTION 86
Site of Study 93
SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS 97
Study Participants 97
CONTEXT OF INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY DURING COVID-19 99
DATA COLLECTION 99
Semi-Structured Interviews 100
Interview Protocol 101

Observation Protocol 101
Field Notes and Reflection 103
DATA ANALYSIS 104
SUMMARY 106

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS 107

SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS AND REVISITING SITE LOCATIONS 107
PRESENTATION OF THEMES 109
Foundational Beliefs and Understandings 109
Developing Processes and Supports 126
Taking Steps Toward Equitable Access to Education? 160
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS 176

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION 178

BELIEF THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN ACHIEVE 178
UNDERSTANDING RACIAL INEQUITIES 181
INDIVIDUAL TEACHER RESPONSE AT SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL 182
Co-Teaching Model at South High School 183
SCHOOLWIDE SYSTEMIC SUPPORT AT NORTHEAST 185
ICS Service Delivery Model at Northeast High School 187
IMPLICATIONS 188
Engage in Conversations to Identify and Address Institutional Racism 189
Conduct an Equity Audit 190
Partner with Community Organizations 191
Invite Families into the Conversation 192
Mandate Preservice Preparation Programs to Include Racial Equity 193
Mandate Racial Equity PD 193
Use Racial Equity Process when Making Policy Decisions 195
Restructure the State Report Card 196
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY 196
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 197
Student and Family Perspective 198
Methods to Measure Effectiveness of Support Structures 198
Continuous Review of Process 199
SUMMARY 199

REFERENCES 201

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE 232

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND EDUCATORS 233

APPENDIX C: SNOWBALL SAMPLING EMAIL 234

APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL FOR DATA PLANNING MEETINGS 235

CURRICULUM VITAE 236

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Placement Continuum for Special Education 23
Figure 2: Layers of the Ecological System 70
Figure 3: Sample Wisconsin School Report Card 88
Figure 4: State Target Groups Alongside State Comparison Groups 89
Figure 5: Points-based Proficiency Rate 90
Figure 6: Example Closing Achievement Gaps Table 91
Figure 7: Closing Achievement Gaps Equation 91
Figure 8: Closing Graduation Gaps Equation 92
Figure 9: Sample School Report Show Graduation Rates 92
Figure 10: Sample School Report Show Graduation Rates for All Student Subgroups 93

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Search Terms 13

Table 2: Site Selection Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria 87

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Chapter I: Introduction

School leaders are being held accountable for the academic "achievement" of their students (ESSA, 2015; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001). Accountability extends to the academic proficiency of students with and without disability labels (ESSA, 2015; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004). The Wisconsin Department of Instruction (2019) uses standardized assessments, such as the American College Testing (ACT) and ACT Aspire, to gauge whether students are achieving (DPI, 2019). The use of standardized assessments to measure student "achievement" has been used to shame public schools (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Guilfoyle, 2006; Hill et al., 2017). If a set percentage of students do not score at predetermined levels on annual administrations of standardized tests, then the school is subject to potential ramifications from the state (DPI, 2019; ESSA, 2015). Milner (2012) argued using standardized assessments to gauge student "achievement" ignores several forms of "achievement" that cannot be measured, such as questioning and examining power differentials in ways that push back against forces of oppression, problem-solving skills, leadership, social activism, or community involvement. The assessments themselves are not adequate measures of academic "achievement" but instead are measures that reflect inequitable conditions of learning. Furthermore, standardized assessments only indicate the performance of a student on a specific day without considering additional factors that influence their performance (Connor et al., 2019; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Mason-Williams, 2015; Mclaughlin, 2010).

The service delivery models to serve students with disability labels vary from one school to the next (Gable et al., 2004; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013). For example, in some schools, teachers may deliver the bulk of the instruction to students with disability labels in the general

education environment whereas other schools may focus on providing their instruction in a special education environment separate for their peers (Chen, 2017; Freidus & Noguera, 2017; Kurth et al., 2015). Furthermore, even when students with disability labels are being given their instruction in the general education environment, the students may have vastly different experiences from one class or school to the next (Atkins, 2016; Chen et al., 2015; Domina et al., 2016; Modica, 2015). Placing a student in the general education environment does not guarantee equitable access to learning opportunities (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Connor et al., 2019; Luschei & Jeong, 2018; Milner, 2012). Kane (2020) wrote that "equitable teachers must be responsive not only to students' disciplinary thinking, but also to the histories and identities of their students, whose cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds may differ sharply from their own" (p. 3). School leaders and educators who believe that practices do not need to be adjusted to meet the needs of students may be denying opportunities to students who would otherwise be successful if adjustments to the curriculum and instruction were made (Drame & Frattura, 2011; Mayer et al., 2018; Oliver, 2013; Slee et al., 2019; St. John et al., 2017).

Connor (2017) asserted that personal knowledge and experience influence the professional practices of school staff. The biases and beliefs of school leaders and educators will determine how they view student "achievement" along with the identification of challenges that may exist to students receiving access to opportunities (Baglieri et al., 2016; Fine, 2019; McLaughlin, 2010). The way school leaders and educators view their current school structure may impact their decision-making process (Angelle, 2017; Eddy-Spicer, 2017). These decisions can include a more accurate method to assess student "achievement", the development of a process to continually evaluate whether students with disability labels are receiving equitable access to opportunities, and the implementation of a support system to assist staff with creating

equitable access to learning opportunities for students with disability labels. Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts that student "achievement" is affected by several factors. Inequities in the conditions of learning contribute to a set of life circumstances that comprise an opportunity gap (Carter & Welner, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). By studying a school that was identified by community organizations to be providing equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels, I hoped to improve my understanding of how school leaders and educators at this school perceived student "achievement" and I hoped to gain insight into how they understood and addressed the challenges to improving student "achievement." Additionally, I wanted to better understand how they supported educators and support staff in reaching this goal.

In this chapter, I will present a statement of the problem I will address in this study. Next, I will discuss the purpose of this study and identify the research questions I will work to answer. After I outline my research questions, I will provide a brief overview of the methods I will be implementing to answer my questions. After I provide an outline of my research methods, I will discuss my relationship to the study and explain how I became interested in the topic of this research. Following my discussion on how I became interested with this topic, I will explain the significance of the current study and provide a discussion of my research assumptions. Finally, I will provide a list of the key terms that will be discussed throughout this study.

Problem Statement

Students with disability labels are spending more time in the general education environment. However, the "achievement" gap, based on results from the annual ACT assessment, between students with and without disability labels has not significantly narrowed (Kotok, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Furthermore, academic

"achievement" for students with disability labels in the areas of math and reading have not significantly increased for the past decade (U.S. Department of Education [UDOE], 2009, 2013, 2015). Based on the current accountability measures, schools face potential ramifications for not improving the academic "achievement" of students with disability labels (DPI, 2019; ESSA, 2015). The sole use of standardized assessments to measure "achievement" privileges White ways of knowing and cancels out the knowledge that students from non-dominant cultural groups bring into the classroom (Boucher, 2016; Connor, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings et al., 2017; Pitre, 2014). Furthermore, Milner (2012) argued the current metrics for describing student "achievement" frames White middle-class students without disability labels as the norm group. Okun (2021)

One intention of recent legislation is to "close achievement gaps" (NCLB, 2001; ESSA, 2015); however, Corn (2016) and Milner (2012) question to what extent "achievement" and learning are synonymous. For example, standardized assessments are unable to measure student resiliency, community involvement, leadership capabilities, or a student's ability to problem-solve. Furthermore, standardized assessments ignore the factors that impact student learning such as student experience, nutrition, family income, and nutrition (Connor & Ferri, 2007; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Pfeffer, 2018; Plucker et al., 2018).

The placement of students with disability labels in the general education environment does not guarantee that the students will be provided with equitable access to opportunities. Despite the trend of schools educating students with disability labels in the general education environment (NCES, 2018), general education teachers often report a lack of knowledge on how to appropriately differentiate curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners or with managing challenging behaviors (Domina et al., 2016; Gable et al., 2004; Gallagher, 2004; Gavish, 2017;

Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). In addition, parents reported their child's label often impacted teacher expectations and prevented their child from successfully interacting with their same-aged peers (Atkins, 2016; Chen, 2017).

Ainscow and Messiou (2018) argued that when students with disability labels are not being provided with equitable access to learning opportunities, the students may struggle with academics, forming social relationships, and developing skills to help them be successful once they graduate from high school. There is a robust amount of literature discussing student "achievement" and the "achievement" gap (Annamma et al., 2014; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Burris & Welner, 2005; Guilfoyle, 2006; Hill et al., 2017; Mintrop & Zane, 2017; Townsend et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of an understanding on how school leaders and educators at a school identified by community organizations to be providing equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels understand "achievement" or their process for creating and sustaining their practices.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how school leaders and educators at schools identified as demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" for students with disability labels perceive "achievement." In addition to developing a better understanding of how school leaders and educators perceive "achievement," this study will investigate what staff view as challenges to student "achievement" along with identifying the practices in place to support staff with creating equitable access to different opportunities for students with disability labels. This study will be based upon the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders and educators at schools selected for this study perceive "achievement"?

2. What do school leaders and educators view as challenges to student "achievement"?
3. How do school leaders and educators enable and create continuous equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels?
4. How are school leaders and educators supported in this work?

My study will be framed by Ecological Systems Theory because my study will be focused on how the beliefs of school leaders and educators and school practices influence equitable opportunities for students with disability labels. The type of environment where individuals work influences their personal development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theoretical framework will help explain how the biases and perceptions of school leaders and educators (mesosystem) contribute to the school culture (macrosystem) and the practices being implemented (microsystem) to create equitable opportunities for students with disability labels. Additionally, Critical Disability Studies is used as a framework to understand that disability is a social construct (exosystem) (Connor, 2019; Gallagher, 2004; Slee et al., 2019).

In order to address the research questions outlined above, I will be utilizing qualitative methods to answer my research questions. I will be conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with school leaders and educators who have an intimate knowledge of the creation and implementation of practices to enable access to learning opportunities for students with disability labels. In addition to interviews, I will be conducting a series of observations of planning meetings focused on analyzing the challenges that may develop along with whether students with disability labels are "achieving" under the current structure in place.

Relationship to the Study

Over the past 14 years as a White, male special education teacher, I worked in both urban and suburban school districts. I have had the opportunity to witness the implementation of a

variety of student supports intended to improve the academic “achievement” of students with disability labels. I began my teaching career in a large urban school district that had a student enrollment that was 87.6% students of color, 19.6% students with disability labels, 7.2% students with limited English proficiency, and 70.8% students who were economically disadvantaged. I worked with students in a self-contained special education environment for the entire school day. After working in the urban school district for three years, I obtained a special education teaching position in a suburban school district that implemented the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity (ICS) framework. The suburban school district had a student enrollment that was 19% students of color, 11% students with disability labels, 3.9% students with limited English proficiency, and 14.6% students who were economically disadvantaged. My current school district, where I am employed as a special education teacher, provides instruction in both the general education and special education environment. The school is located in a suburban school district that has a student enrollment that is 29.3% students of color, 7.6% students with disability labels, 4.6% students with limited English proficiency, and 26.4% students who are economically disadvantaged.

Throughout my professional experiences, I observed that school member perspectives towards students with disability labels varied from school to school. Specific viewpoints of faculty often determined student placements and school programming. Early in my professional career, many of my decisions were based on prior experiences. After my experience at a high school implementing the Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS) model, I was able to observe students with disability labels excel in high-level general education classes. I was able to witness the ability students had to succeed when the school system was adjusted to allow the conventional notions of success to become evident for all learners. At my current place of

employment, I still hear a deficit-narrative and see practices that promote disparate performance between dominant and oppressed groups. I frequently observed school members implementing decisions rooted in firsthand experiences instead of sound research. If faculty have not experienced how school systems can be adjusted to allow students to demonstrate their abilities, they may continue to perpetuate the deficit-narrative of oppressed groups of students.

This question initiated my inquiry to better understand the processes school leaders and educators at a school narrowing the "achievement" gap implement to evaluate the facilitators and barriers for the current system in place for serving students with disability labels. My past experiences, along with my personal value system, have led me to favor special education services being implemented in the general education environment. Through my experiences as an educator, I developed an educational philosophy that recognizes all students have the ability to make academic progress and that this can be measured in multiple ways so that annual standardized assessments do not have to be the only gauge of "achievement." In addition to recognizing all students have the ability to learn, I learned that individual supports for students with disability labels may vary greatly from one school to another. Through my perspective, it appeared students with disability labels performed better academically and behaviorally when they were scheduled into a general education classroom with a teacher who believed in their abilities.

The literature identifies several supports that can be put into place to assist students with disability labels (Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Harbour et al., 2015; Heron-Hruby et al., 2018; Kilday et al., 2016; Young & Luttenegger, 2014). However, there are equally as many barriers to improving the "achievement" of students with disability labels (Atkins, 2016; Chen, 2017; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Gavish, 2017; King-Sears et al., 2014; Schwab et al., 2018). With

so many factors affecting student "achievement", I began to see the importance of better understanding who develops the process to continually evaluate the effectiveness of individual student supports utilized at a school and to what extent work is done to involve all voices into the process. In this study, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews and observations to better understand the procedure for school leaders and educators to evaluate the successes and barriers of the individual student supports being implemented at a school successfully closing "achievement" gaps.

Significance of the Study

Ainscow (2005) defined inclusive practices as "involving attempts to overcome barriers to the participation and learning of students" (p. 112). Inclusive education requires more than just placing students with various labels in the same general education classroom (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Atkins, 2016; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Kurth et al., 2015; Nomi & Raudenbush, 2013; Rangvid, 2018). As more students with disability labels started to receive most of their instruction in the general education environment (NCES, 2017), the co-teaching model became a popular method to provide supports to these students in the general education classroom (Friend et al., 1993; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014; Nichols et al., 2010; Walsh, 2012). The co-teaching model has been implemented to support students with disability labels in the general education environment (Friend, 2008; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014). However, there is little evidence in the literature on the effectiveness of this model (Chen, 2017; Gilmour, 2018; Schwab et al., 2018; Wilson & Michaels, 2006). Furthermore, the body of literature examining co-teaching most often focuses on the relationships between the general education and special education teaching partners (Friend, 2008; Friend et al., 2010; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2016; Mandel & Eiserman, 2016; Solis et al., 2012).

Naraian (2017) wrote that inclusive education emerged from special education when families and educators advocated for students with disability labels to be placed in the general education environment. The definition of inclusive education has broadened to include that general education classrooms should be hospitable to the learning of all students. Various instructional methods should be implemented to accommodate the individual needs of the students. Additionally, inclusive education involves teachers that believe all students can learn and are valuable members to the learning community.

Capper and Frattura (2009) asserted that the implementation of inclusive practices requires a school-wide approach whereas co-teaching places the responsibility of instructing students with disability labels only on a few teachers. There is literature showing the potential that inclusive practices help to provide a more equitable access to learning opportunities for students with disability labels (Bryk et al., 2010; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Huberman et al., 2012). However, the literature also identifies many challenges that have the potential of preventing students with disability labels from accessing the same opportunities as other students without labels (Renda Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Ladson-Billings et al., 2017; Luschei & Jeong, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Pfeffer, 2018).

What is missing from the literature is an examination of how school leaders and educators at a school identified by community organizations to provide equitable access to opportunities perceive student "achievement." Additionally, the literature is missing an exploration into what practices school leaders and educators consider when creating equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels. The literature is also missing an

understanding of how school leaders and educators view challenges to developing equitable access to opportunities and how they support their staff to implement this work.

This study will elaborate and build on the previous literature outlining the importance of providing equitable access to learning opportunities for students with disability labels. Additionally, it will examine the potential for developing alternate understandings for student "achievement." Furthermore, this study will explore what school leaders and educators consider when they enable and create continuous equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels. Finally, this study will analyze how school leaders and educators are supported in this work.

Definition of Key Terms

Achievement gap: The "difference in academic performance between two subgroups when one group outperforms another group" on an annually administered standardized test (Kotok, 2017, p. 184).

Equitable teachers: "Equitable teachers must be responsive not only to students' disciplinary thinking, but also to the histories and identities of their students, whose cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds may differ sharply from their own" (Kane, 2020, p. 3).

Inclusive education: Providing a hospitable learning experience within the general education environment that understands that all students can learn, accommodates the needs of all students, and views all students as valuable members of the learning community (Naraian, 2017).

Inclusive practices: Practices that "involve attempts to overcome barriers to the participation and learning of students" (Ainscow, 2005, p. 112).

Individualized education plan (IEP): An individualized education plan that must be developed annually to outline the educational program for students with disability labels (IDEA, 2004).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): "To the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped" (Education for All Handicapped Children Act [EAHCA], 1975, p. 781).

Opportunity gap: Circumstances of life and conditions of learning that contribute to lower academic attainment to specific groups of students (Connor, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings et al., 2017; Milner, 2012).

Specially designed instruction (SDI): The instructional method and delivery necessary to assist students with disability labels to make meaningful educational progress (IDEA, 2004).

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter provides a review of the literature addressing special education and serving students with disability labels with a focus on addressing the challenges associated with developing school-wide systems to support students with disability labels. There is an extensive body of literature in which researchers discuss special education and the barriers present in schools that influence the narrowing of the "achievement" gap between students with and without disability labels (Blanchett et al., 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Freidus & Noguera, 2017; Hattie, 2011; Lalvani, 2015; Mahabir, 2015; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). To address the research questions outlined in chapter one, I conducted a literature search using the online library database of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In addition to the online library database, I used the Milwaukee Public Library online search engine to find relevant publications. I used different terms and search strategies to systematically select journal articles and books as primary sources of information for this study.

Scope of the Review

In conducting my review of the literature, I first developed a list of search terms using Boolean operators in order to direct the results of my searches (Booth et al., 2013). Table 1 details the terms that I used to focus my literature search. I initiated my search using the broader terms located on the far left of the table and gradually refined my search using the more specific terms located on the far right of the table. Several of the articles cited in this literature review materialized repeatedly as I implemented different combinations of the search terms, while some articles emerged when specific terms were searched.

Table 1

Search Terms

High school	School culture	Medical model

Secondary education	Social capital	Social construct model
Special education	School-based resources	Differentiation
Achievement gap	Professional development	Mainstream
School leadership	Placement continuum	Inclusion
Social justice leadership	Academic barriers	Asset-based mindset
Co-teaching	Academic support	Deficit-based mindset
Tracking	Community partnerships	

Note. Search terms are categorized from the most generalized terms in the left column to most specific terms in the far-right column.

For example, I used the EBSCO search engine to combine the terms secondary education AND special education and my search yielded over 42,000 articles. When I combined the terms special education AND achievement gap, my search yielded just under 400 articles. When I conducted my search combining special education AND achievement gap AND inclusion, my search resulted in just under 50 articles. These different combinations of terms helped me to narrow the article listings in order to help me navigate the literature while identifying overlapping publications. Adding terms such as service delivery, tracking, placement continuum, inclusion, or differentiation to previous searches helped me to narrow results to focus on specific elements of the research questions.

From the search results, I selected publications I determined to be of high quality based on Booth et al. (2013) steps to assess an evidenced-based framework. Booth et al. (2013) defined assessing the evidence base as “the point in the review process that focuses on the particular value that individual studies hold for your research question and the practical application of research” (p. 97). I selected publications that would help me to answer my research questions. I selected publications that were focused on the factors that influence academic “achievement” along with those that discussed providing equitable access to academic opportunities. I implemented this evidence-based framework to make sure my research was specific and on

target to address my research questions. Additionally, I searched for publications that were previously cited in pertinent articles. When I found authors who had made large contributions to the field of special education research, I proceeded to search for articles by particular authors. I also searched the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for information pertaining to standardized "achievement" results and for information on demographics, percentage of students with disability labels, and amount of time in the general education environment. As I started to research articles based on the criteria discussed previously, I began to develop a deeper knowledge of the literature and used it to expand my search criteria. For example, through my research I developed an understanding that there is a debate within special education about the perception of disability (Gallagher, 2004). This development led me to search for more articles on this particular topic.

Historical Views of Students with Disability Labels

In this section, I will provide an overview of the historical lens in which society has viewed individuals given disability labels. The two primary models pertaining to how society views students with disability labels are the medical model and the social model (Fine, 2019; Oliver, 2013). I will begin this section by defining the medical model of disability and highlight how this model tends to be deficit-based. Next, I will discuss how the medical model looks in public schools and examine how this model is often the de facto viewpoint for serving students with disability labels in the public school system. Following my discussion on the medical model of disability, I will define the social model of disability and discuss how this model provides an asset-based framework for working with students with disability labels. Finally, I will examine what it may look like to implement the social model in a public school.

Medical Model of Disability

Gallagher (2004) defined the medical model of disability as the assumption that a deficit exists within the individual and there is a need to fix the deficit. Furthermore, the medical model lens views disability as a problem located in a person's body or brain (Collins et al., 2016; Connor, 2019; Sleeter, 1986). The medical model is also commonly referred to as the traditional model of special education due in large part to being the dominant perspective at the initial development of special education (Connor, 2017; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Fine, 2019; McLaughlin, 2010). Prior to passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in1975, members of society did not consider the educational needs of students with disability labels at all (Connor, 2019; Oliver, 2017; Shealey et al., 2005; Sleeter, 1986).

Students with disability labels have often been viewed as inferior to their peers without disability labels and thus, have not been given the same opportunities (Atkins, 2016; Blanchett, 2010; Blanchett et al., 2009; Chen, 2017; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gavish, 2017; Lalvani, 2015; Mahabir, 2015). Historically, if an individual was perceived to have a disability, "they" were considered to have no value to society (Brock, 2018; Durand & Neufeldt, 1980; Mahabir, 2015; Reynolds, 1962). Beirne-Smith et al. (2004) wrote that many individuals with disability labels were funneled into institutions because there was a belief that they were incapable of holding a job or contributing to society. The institutions where these individuals with disability labels were placed were inhumane and often used medication to sedate patients in order to manage overcrowding. In addition, many children in institutions were not exposed to an education or given the opportunity to develop skills in order to become more independent. Even after students with disability labels were given the right to attend public schools, many school leaders subscribed to the medical model and implemented a deficit-based program for students in

special education (Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, 2019; EAHCA, 1975; McLaughlin, 2010; Oliver, 2013; Sleeter, 1986).

Medical Model of Disability in Public Schools. Baglieri et al. (2011) wrote that those individuals subscribing to the medical model "understand the purpose of special education as changing the individual through performance-enhancing interventions" (p. 268). School leaders with this viewpoint believe special education should be designed to prepare students with disability labels to adapt to society upon their completion of school (Baglieri et al., 2011; Collins, 2013). Instead of viewing a range of differences amongst learners, students are usually divided into two types of students. Students are classified as requiring special needs (special education student) or not requiring special needs (general education student). The focus is on the deficiency of the student and interventions are developed to help reduce the student's deficiency and better adapt to the world (Connor et al., 2019; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Gallagher, 2004; Slee et al., 2019). Thompson and Timmons (2017) noted this view can be problematic because when educators solely concentrate on a student's deficits, the student is often not given the opportunity to share their strengths with other students or be exposed to different methods to solve a problem. Additionally, Paulsen (2018) asserted that when students are removed from their peers without disability labels, students with disability labels often become isolated from their peers.

Some educators have a belief that students with disability labels would receive a greater benefit in a special education environment (Chen, 2017; Coleman & Peters, 2016; Devries & Gebhardt, 2018). For example, Atkins (2016) noted that when students required more significant support in the general education environment, teachers felt the students were becoming segregated within the classroom. For instance, when a student required a scribe in the classroom,

the scribe became a barrier for the student from participating in small group discussions. Slee et al. (2019) noted some general education teachers subscribing to the medical model feel they have the inability to provide students with disability labels adequate instruction and that they would receive greater benefit from remedial courses or in a separate special education environment. Furthermore, Lalvani (2015) argued school leaders that embrace the medical model foster a more segregated experience for students with disability labels.

Some school personnel who embrace the medical model of disability perpetuate the deficit-based ideology of ableism (Renda Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Connor, 2019; Connor et al., 2019; Milner, 2017). Connor (2017) defined ableism as discrimination against people who are perceived to have a disability and viewing people with disability labels as inferior to people who are non-disabled. Milner (2017) argued that when teachers do not believe all students are capable of being successful, they are less likely to differentiate and deliver curriculum through a frame of reference that makes the content more relevant and easier to master. Furthermore, Collins and Ferri (2016) argued that general education teachers are more likely to refer students who are struggling in their class to special education instead of assessing how their curriculum could be adapted to meet their needs. This process may cause students to be pulled out of content classes for specialized instruction resulting in missed instruction time for core classes or may place an undesired stigma on the student (Chen et al., 2015; Lalvani, 2015; Shifrer et al., 2013; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Fine (2019) argued that ableism places a stigma on individuals perceived to be disabled and creates a sense of superiority for those who are perceived to be non-disabled. For example, Freidus and Noguera (2017) observed an English class where the teacher assigned students to groups based on mixed-ability levels. The teacher developed groups that consisted of students

the teacher deemed high-ability and low-ability. When the teacher assigned roles to students in each group, students deemed high ability were given most of the leadership roles. The result of assigning roles based on ability level was that the high-ability students viewed themselves as the teachers and did most of the talking in their group. They viewed themselves as superior with a lot to offer to the group while believing that they had nothing to learn from the students with a perceived lower ability.

Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability strikes a clear contrast between impairment and disability (Linton, 1998). Impairment refers to “variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing” (Linton, 1998, p. 2), whereas a disability is created by a social environment that does not take their needs into account. For example, an individual who cannot hear has an impairment. But they are disabled by a movie theater that does not use Closed Captioning or a courtroom that does not have ASL interpreters. In the school context, Collins and Ferri (2016) defined the social model as understanding that “disability is not seen as a problem located in particular bodies or brains of individual students but rather as a social artifact created and maintained by a lack of fit between a particular learner and his or her context” (p. 8).

The social model challenges the medical model and strives to destigmatize the differences amongst individuals (Baglieri et al., 2011; Slee et al., 2019). Furthermore, Gallagher (2004) asserted that human behavior is complicated and can change at any time; therefore, it is impossible to generalize people into two distinct groups (disabled vs. abled). Furthermore, Baglieri et al. (2011) argued that it is evident that disability labels are constructed based on judgement because definitions for disabilities, such as emotional behavioral disability (EBD),

specific learning disability (SLD), and intellectual disability (ID) have changed and continue to change. If the definitions of disability classifications change over time, this suggests that these classifications are a social construct.

Social Model of Disability in Public Schools. Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is an educational theory that challenges the medical model of disability and argues for an examination of the practices in place at schools that shape a student's dis/ability (Collins, 2013, p. 284). If school personnel recognized the role of society plays in defining students, they would not view students as binary (disabled or abled) and would view student variance as standard. Student differences would be viewed as a strength and teachers would develop curriculum incorporating the strengths of individuals with disability labels (Renda Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). A result of viewing student differences as a strength, classrooms would be heterogeneous environments so students would have the opportunity to learn from one another (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Huber et al., 2001; Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Collins (2013) argued that the social model is needed in schools to identify and disrupt the marginalization of students that perceive differences as deficits. Individuals who subscribe to the social model believe many of the difficulties a student may have been a result of environmental limitations and not due to deficiencies within the student (Baglieri et al., 2011). For example, Collins and Ferri (2016) discussed the challenges specific students had when attempting to complete a writing assignment. If a student is struggling with an assignment, the teacher should analyze the situation and reflect on what barriers exist preventing the successful completion of the assignment. For instance, technology may be required for the student to dictate

his or her response. Additionally, the context of the writing prompt may need to be changed in order to be more relevant to the student.

The previous section provided a definition for the social model of disability along with identifying the key characteristics associated with that model. In addition to providing a definition, I provided characteristics of how the social model may look in a public school. I explained that staff reflection is an essential element to developing a more equitable education system for students given disability labels (Kilday et al., 2016; Rojas & Liou, 2017). Staff need to reflect on whether their practices perpetuate inequitable opportunities or if their practices remove barriers and provide equal access to academic opportunities for all learners. In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of the development of special education services in public schools and the placement continuum utilized by schools to service students with disability labels.

The Placement Continuum and Serving Students with Disability Labels

The struggle to provide educational opportunities for students with disability labels was initiated, and driven, by parents and disability advocates (Carson, 2015; Lalvani, 2015; Mahabir, 2015; McGovern, 2015; Shealey et al., 2005). The fight for increased academic opportunities for students with disability labels gained traction in the late 1960s and picked up momentum through a series of court cases in the early 1970s (P.A.R.C. v. Pennsylvania, 1972; Mills v. Board, 1972). In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all students, regardless of disability label, had the right to a free public education that was appropriate for their intellectual ability (Mills v. Board, 1972).

Lawsuits filed by advocacy groups and parents of students with disability labels culminated in two landmark pieces of federal legislation (McGovern, 2015). The Rehabilitation

Act of 1973 guaranteed students with disability labels access to accommodations in public schools, and EAHCA mandated that all students with disability labels receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). In addition to FAPE, students with disability labels were entitled to special education and related services uniquely designed for their individual needs. EAHCA (1975) made sure the rights of children with disability labels were protected and included a due process clause that guaranteed impartial hearings to resolve conflicts between parents and school districts. Schools were required to evaluate students with disability labels and wrote individualized education plans (IEP) to create programs in order for students to access the curriculum in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Students with disability labels could only be separated from their non-disabled peers when the severity of the disability prevented students from achieving their academic goals in the general education classroom (EAHCA, 1975; ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 1997; McGovern, 2015).

One of the provisions protecting students with disability labels that has existed since the initial passage of EAHCA in 1975 has been ensuring students are educated in the LRE. EAHCA (1975) defined LRE as:

> to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (p. 781).

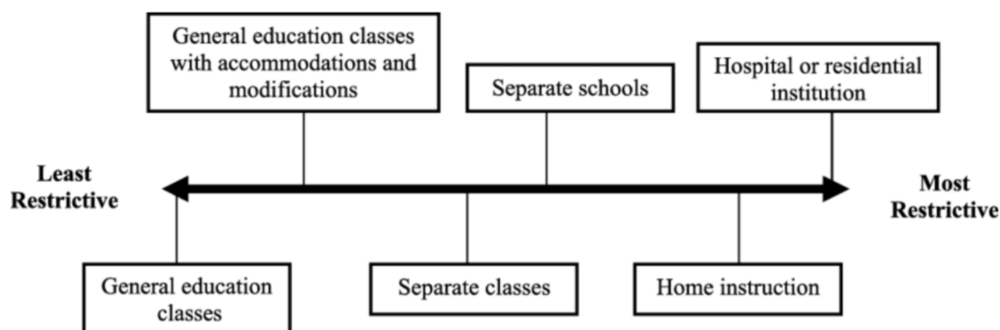
When EAHCA (1975) defined LRE, the phrase “to the maximum extent appropriate” created ambiguity and left student placement to be somewhat subjective. Carson (2015) argued that there

has never been a clear definition of LRE developed, and it has been left up to interpretation. Over the 45 years of special education, a placement continuum has been adopted where different environments have been emphasized depending on the time period (Brock, 2018; Ennis, 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017; Sleeter, 1986; Taylor, 1988; Taylor, 2004; Thousand et al., 1997).

The following sections will provide an overview of the primary placements used to serve students with disability labels (see Figure 1). On one side of the placement continuum, students with disability labels were served in alternate placements or separate health care facilities. Next, students with disability labels attended the same schools as their non-disabled peers but were educated in separate, segregated classes for students with special needs. On the other end of the placement continuum, students with disability labels received their services in the general education environment with their non-disabled peers (Brock, 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017; Murphy, 1996; Taylor, 2004).

Figure 1

Placement Continuum for Special Education



Note. A representation of the LRE continuum for students with disability labels (Rozalski et al., 2010).

Educating Students with Disability Labels in Separate Environments

Payne and Patton (1981) argued that the concept of LRE legitimized a restrictive environment as an option for students with disability labels. By having placement options, Durand and Neufeldt (1980) asserted that LRE developed a readiness model where it was the responsibility of the student to earn a spot in the general education environment. This model reinforced the role of gatekeepers who made the determination of which students had access to the general education curriculum and which students did not (Ainscow, 2005; Brock, 2018; Taylor, 1988). The principles of LRE placed a greater emphasis on the physical setting rather than the services and supports being delivered to support students with disability labels in school (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Ennis & Katsiyannis, 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017; Slee et al., 2019).

When special education was initially developed, the focus was on the student and not necessarily on developing an equitable system (Dybwad, 1980; Singletary & Collings, 1978). School leaders worked to expose students with disability labels to an education; however, there was little done to measure their academic "achievement" to determine if adequate services were being provided. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school districts merely had to meet a very minimal standard by providing students with services in order for them to receive a minimal educational benefit rather proving the supports they needed to maximize their access to curriculum (Hudson v. Rowley, 1982).

A decade after the implementation of EAHCA, over two-thirds of students with disability labels (68.3%) spent at least 80 percent of their school day outside the general education environment (UDOE, 2017). In fact, it was not until 2004 when most students with disability labels (51.5%) finally started to spend at least 80 percent of their school day in the general

education environment (USDOE, 2017). The LRE provision was intended to provide FAPE to students with disability labels. However, the ambiguous statement of the provision provided justification for students with disability labels to be educated in alternate settings (Brock, 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Heron & Skinner, 1981; Yell, 1995).

Murphy (1996) argued that the placement of students in alternate environments placed a greater emphasis on the programming of students rather than on the services needed for students with disability labels. Additionally, segregated placements often implement rote instruction that focuses exclusively on student weaknesses with little to no opportunity to develop their strengths (Corn, 2006; Mason-Williams, 2015; Pitre, 2014). Furthermore, Kurth et al. (2015) observed one school's model for providing special education services for students with disability labels, and found they were routinely removed from their general education classes to receive their services in an alternate environment. Not only did the students with disability labels miss important instructional time, but the students most in need of support were expected to seek out the content they missed during the time they were removed.

Shift Towards General Education Placement

From 1989 to 2010, students with disability labels began to spend more of their school day in the general education environment compared to alternate placements. The number of students with disability labels who spent the majority of their school day in the general education environment nearly doubled. The percentage of all students with disability labels spending at least 80% of their school day in the general education environment increased from 31.7 percent in 1989 to 60.5 percent in 2010 (USDOE, 2017).

There was a significant shift in educational placement during the late 1990s and early 2000s into the general education environment. Most students who participated in this movement

into the general education environment had disability labels such as Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) or Other Health Impairment (OHI). However, many students who had disability labels such as autism (A), intellectual disability (ID), or emotional behavioral disability (EBD) remained excluded from opportunities in the general education environment and continued to receive the majority of their instruction in alternate environments (USDOE, 2018).

In contrast to the change in student placement from 1989-2010, the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES; 2019) shows there has only been a slight increase since 2010. Between 2010 and 2017 there was a slight increase in the percentage of students with disability labels who spent at least 80% of their school day in the general education environment from 60.5% to 63.4%. In 2017, students with an EBD label continued to spend less time in the general education environment compared to their peers with a disability label such as SLD or OHI. For students with an EBD label, only 48.5% of the students spend at least 80% of their day in the general education environment as compared to 69.5% of students with an SLD label. For students with more significant disability labels, there are even fewer students spending at least 80% of their school day in the general education environment: Autism (39.7%), Intellectual Disability (16.9%), Multiple Disabilities (13.7%), and Deaf-Blindness (23.6%) (USDOE, 2017).

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 worked to improve student participation in the general education environment. One of the intents of the reauthorization was to improve academic participation and progress in the general education environment by making sure teachers had preparation to include students with disability labels, and by requiring general education teachers to be part of the IEP team. Their participation in the IEP development process was meant to ensure that students with disability labels received the necessary accommodations and services to help them find success in the general education environment.

The placement of students with disability labels in the general education environment, alone, will not result in academic success (Atkins, 2016; Chen, 2017; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Gavish, 2017; Rangvid, 2018). For example, Chen et al. (2015) completed an analysis from the NCES to better understand the impact of placing students with disability labels in the general education environment at 36 different schools and found that students with disability labels had a much different experience at school than students without labels. Data from the longitudinal study reported there were low levels of integration in the school social system resulting in increased peer victimization for students with disability labels along with the development of a smaller social network.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, schools used a variety of supports to help students with disability labels spend more time in the general education environment (Cavendish et al., 2017; DeMatthews, 2015). For example, schools increased the use of co-teaching to provide special education services in the general education environment. Additionally, schools implemented new educational frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), that focused on differentiation to meet the needs of diverse students and embraced modifications to build on the strengths of students (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Friend, 2016; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018).

Co-Teaching to Support General Education Placement

In order to provide appropriate support in the general education environment, many schools adopted the co-teaching service delivery model (Friend, 2008; Friend et al., 1993; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014; Murdock et al., 2016). Friend et al. (2010) defined co-teaching as classes containing a general education teacher and a special education teacher sharing responsibilities and providing instruction within the same classroom. In this model, the general

education teacher brings a deeper understanding of the content curriculum, and the special education teacher brings a deeper understanding of individual education plans, differentiation, and behavioral intervention plans in planning students' opportunities to learn (Bronson & Dentith, 2014; Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

Research on effective co-teaching has been focused on the relationship between the co-teaching partners along with their ability to collaborate during a common planning period (Friend, 2008; Dieker & Murawski, 2013). Additionally, Friend (2016) noted that much of the benefit of co-teaching exists during the collaborative planning process when the teaching teams work together to differentiate the curriculum to create access for all the students in the class. At the secondary level, teachers involved in co-teaching discussed it was imperative that administration provided time for them to collaborate with their co-teaching partner in order to develop curriculum that was differentiated to meet the needs of all their students (Bronson & Dentith, 2014; Friend, 2008; Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Forbes and Billet (2012) suggested another benefit of having two teachers in the same classroom was that it allowed teachers to assist one another with emotional support while having the added benefit of having another professional present for reflecting on the quality of the lesson and student progress.

In addition to having the potential of developing lessons that meet the needs of a range of learners, Walsh (2012) suggested co-teaching may improve academic outcomes because it provides access to the general education curriculum for students with disability labels. Not only do students with disability labels gain access to general education curriculum, Strogilos and Avramidis (2016) found students with disability labels were able to gain more individualized instruction when placed in a co-taught classroom. Furthermore, students have reported that it was

easier to obtain teacher assistance when there were more teachers in the classroom (Wilson & Michaels, 2006).

Co-teaching has been widely implemented as a strategy to expose more students with disability labels to the general education environment. The use of co-teaching has also created concerns regarding student equity (Hattie 2011; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Frattura & Capper, 2016). Capper and Frattura (2009) were critical of co-teaching because they wrote "this practice can be problematic in that there are not enough student services staff to be paired with all general education teachers, which results in students with learning differences being clustered (another term for segregated) in particular co-teaching classrooms" (p. 25). They propose an alternate approach to serving students with disability labels in the general education environment. Instead of placing complete responsibility for serving students on co-teaching partners, they recommend a whole school approach to serving students with disability labels.

Shift Towards Inclusive Education

When President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law in 2015, even more accountability was placed on schools to make sure students with disability labels were making academic progress. School districts were required to report assessment results for more student subgroups along with reporting on the distribution of effective teachers. Not only was student "achievement" identified for improvement, ESSA (2015) recognized students with disability labels were disproportionally impacted by bullying and required states to develop and implement plans on how to reduce these incidents at their schools. Recent decisions increasing accountability measures (ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2001) make it essential that school leaders approach improving academic "achievement" through inclusive practices (Burris & Welner, 2005; Hill et al., 2017; Simonsen et al., 2010).

Ainscow (2005) defined inclusive practices as "involving attempts to overcome barriers to the participation and learning of students" (p. 112). Proponents of inclusive education argued that it has the potential to improve student equity by eliminating barriers and may improve the academic "achievement" of students historically marginalized (Renda Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Fisher & Shogren, 2016; Paulsen, 2018). Frattura and Capper (2016) noted that the development of a more equitable education experience for all learners must start from the district level and transition down to individual schools.

Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS) is a framework that adopts the social model and is designed to provide a more equitable access to the general education environment regardless of a student's label (Frattura & Capper, 2016). Frattura and Capper (2006) defined integrated environments as "settings that all students – regardless of need or legislative eligibility – access throughout their day in school and non-school settings" (p. 356). Comprehensive services are defined as an "array of services and supports centered on a differentiated curriculum and instruction that all students receive to ensure academic and behavioral success" (Frattura & Capper, 2006, p. 356). ICS places an emphasis on implementing differentiated services instead of the placement of students in specific types of classes or programs (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Sindelar et al., 2006).

In order to provide students with a more equitable education experience, Capper and Frattura (2009) stressed the importance of school leaders shifting their model to support students from programs to services. Additionally, DeMatthews (2016) argued the importance of school leadership in the development of a school-wide culture promoting the support of all learners. Miranda et al. (2018) asserted that school principals need to develop a school identity that strives to support all learners, and that is backed by a list of commitments that will ensure an equitable

education for all students known as equity non-negotiables. An example of an equity non-negotiable would be that all school staff members are responsible for the prevention of student failure. In order to successfully implement ICS as a school-wide model to develop equitable services to all students, school leaders must work through four cornerstones. Frattura and Capper (2006) stressed the four cornerstones leadership must address are: a.) focus on equity, b.) align staff and students, c.) transform teaching and learning, and d.) leverage funding and policy.

Focus on Equity. The first principle of cornerstone one is to eliminate separate programming. Frattura and Capper (2006) argued that separate programming is a response to student failure and school leaders need to develop a system to prevent student failure. Instead of developing programs to address students who have already failed, ICS is designed to help school leaders be proactive in order to provide the necessary services for students in the general education classroom before they start to fail. Preventing student failure is done with the second principle focusing on equity, which is building teacher capacity. Frattura and Capper (2006) wrote "when the same student or group of students are routinely removed from the classroom to receive instruction elsewhere, the classroom teacher is released from the responsibility of learning how to teach not only those students, but all future students with similar needs…" (p. 358). School leaders need to develop a system to prepare teachers to work with a diverse range of students. The last principle of the first cornerstone is to stop thinking about how students can fit into programs but how systems can be changed to meet the needs of all students. By shifting the conversation to the school system instead of the student, school leaders can make decisions based on elements within their locus of control (Capper & Young, 2014; DeMatthews, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Miranda et al., 2018).

Align Staff and Students. The second cornerstone of ICS focuses on analyzing the placements of students. It emphasizes analyzing the makeup of classes to make sure that student segregation is not occurring under another name (Frattura & Capper, 2016). For example, classes should reflect the enrollment population of the school. If a school has 15 percent of the student enrollment identified with a disability label, each class should not exceed that distribution. Frattura and Capper (2009) argued that even if students are in a general education classroom, if the makeup of the class exceeds the natural proportions of the school, then another form of segregation is taking place. In addition to developing learning environments that match the enrollment of the school, staff need to be assigned based on the needs of the students.

Transform Teaching and Learning. Naraian and Schlessinger (2018) found that most educators support the concept of inclusive education; however, they lack the knowledge to implement the practices effectively. In order to implement the elements of ICS, school leaders need to make inclusion and student equity a priority of the district (Sailor, 2015; Theoharis & Causton, 2014; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Continual professional development targeting differentiation is a trademark of sustained success (Gavish, 2017; Kurth et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2010). Once school leaders share their vision for school-wide support of all students, they must provide their staff with the necessary tools and continually re-evaluate whether the structures in place are meeting the needs of all students (Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Miranda et al., 2018; Theoharis & Causton, 2014).

Leverage Funding and Policy. School districts must always refer back to their Equity Non-Negotiables when determining policies and procedures for their schools. Capper and Frattura (2009) argued that school leaders need to reconceptualize how their funding is utilized by writing "funding sources must merge for services for all students instead of restricting

services by specific funding sources and formulas" (p. 122). For example, if a school district is currently placing a few students in alternate placements outside the district based on the needs of the student, district personnel can work to implement a comparable learning environment within the district and use the saved funds for other needs. Furthermore, current structures must be examined to determine if they promote equity or need to be consolidated and redistribute the resources to other areas (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Sailor, 2015).

The previous section discussed the placement continuum that has been used at schools to service students with disability labels. The placement of students with disability labels has ranged from separate, specialized schools to students with disability labels receiving all their instruction in the general education environment with their non-disabled peers (Brock, 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017; NCES, 2017; Singletary & Collins, 1978; Taylor, 1988; Yell, 1995). Over the past forty-five years, the placement of students with disability labels has shifted from separate settings to the general education environment (NCES, 2017). Even though students with disability labels spend more time in the general education environment, the academic gaps between students with and without disability labels have not narrowed (NAEP, 2015). The next section will provide an overview of the "achievement" gap that has existed since the late 1990s between students with disability labels and without disability labels.

Continued Existence of "Achievement Gaps"

NCES (2013) defines an "achievement gap" as the pattern that occurs "when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (p. 210). When the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2001, the intent was to close the "achievement gap" by providing all students with a fair and equal high-quality education (NCLB, 2001). However, Castro-Villarreal and Nichols (2016)

argued that the high stakes testing brought forth by NCLB negatively impacted African American students, students with disability labels, and students who are economically disadvantaged. Furthermore, high stakes testing had a greater negative impact on students with intersectional identities. For example, students with disability labels who were also Black or economically disadvantaged. Even though NCLB had negative consequences for marginalized groups of students, the law required disaggregated data making differences in “achievement”, based on race and disability, evident. (Castro-Villerreal & Nichols, 2016; Love, 2019; NCES, 2015; Kotok, 2017).

The greater school accountability measures outlined in NCLB were meant to improve student outcomes, specifically in the areas of reading and math (Corn, 2006; Guilfoyle, 2006; NCLB, 2001). Some argue that increasing school accountability did not improve student outcomes, and in fact, caused more harm than good (Jeynes, 2015; Mintrop & Zane, 2017; Schulte et al., 2016). For example, Corn (2006) observed a fourth-grade classroom at a school in a *Year Four Program Improvement School* under NCLB. The teacher of the class acknowledged that her focus was on preparing the students to score high on the standardized assessment instead of teaching fundamental skills. For example, the teacher worked on improving the students’ reading fluency instead of comprehension because fluency was the focus of the assessment. Throughout the school year, the class average for fluency increased from 86 words per minute (wpm) to 94 wpm; however, the average comprehension score decreased from 6.2/10 to 4/10. A lot of time was spent increasing the reading rate of the students with no progress in the students’ overall reading skills. The observed teacher concluded, “Practice in fast reading was not what my students needed; they really needed decoding and comprehension instruction” (p. 76). Additionally, Milner (2012) questioned to what extent “achievement” and learning are

synonymous. He warned, “achievement gap explanations can frame White students as the norm from which other…groups of students are to be compared” (p. 696). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2017) described her experience observing urban classrooms where teachers were engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and witnessed student learning that may not appear on a standardized assessment.

One intended outcome of NCLB (2001) was to close student “achievement gaps” by providing all children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. For example, states are mandated to assess the reading and math levels of all students in Grades 3–8. States must provide education that is research-based and has empirical data to support the effectiveness of the curriculum to all students. All students must be instructed by a highly qualified teacher in their core classes (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies). NCLB preceded the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and set the foundation for the higher accountability for schools to service all students with a highly qualified teacher who delivers research-based instruction.

A lasting legacy of NCLB is using disaggregated data, acquired from standardized assessments, to hold schools accountable for student performance. Unintended consequences of NCLB may be that test scores are raised without raising “achievement.” States have the capability to adjust test results by making assessments easier, lowering cut-off scores, and having staff discourage students from testing or attending on test day (Annamma et al., 2014; Burris & Welner, 2005; Guilfoyle, 2006; Ornstein, 2010).

Using scores from standardized assessments to analyze the “achievement” gap forces individuals to view marginalized students with a deficit lens (Milner, 2012). This scenario only identifies the deficiencies of the student without seeking to understand the systems impacting

student learning (Connor, 2017; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When student scores are the sole focus of measuring student “achievement”, research is being centered on student deficits and not working to improve the circumstances to enhance student learning. For example, Milner (2017) explained that the “achievement gap” is a result of other gaps created by public policy such as the gaps in (a) teacher quality; (b) teacher preparation; (c) challenging curriculum; (d) school funding; (e) digital divide; (f) wealth and income; (g) employment opportunity; (h) affordable housing; (i) healthcare; (j) nutrition; (k) school integration; and (l) quality childcare. Milner further asserted that focusing on the “achievement” gap has the effect of blaming the students and families instead of addressing the systemic barriers in place to maintain the current power structure.

Data has supported the presence of an “achievement” gap between racial groups for more than 50 years (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Coleman et al, 1966; Hill et al., 2017; Mason-Williams, 2015; Orstein, 2010; USDOE, 1978, 1990, 1999, 2012). Since the Coleman Report, scholars have completed many studies to understand why “achievement” gaps exist and to learn more about methods to narrow the gap between racial groups and between students from higher SES and lower SES (Jeynes, 2015, Kotok, 2017; Morris, 2015; Noguera, 2017; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Significant gaps in student “achievement” still exist between White students and Black students, results from NAEP have shown evidence in a narrowing of the gap (NCES, 2015). Prior to 2001, most standardized test results only disaggregated data by race and SES. Once President Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law in 2001, scholars obtained access to a much greater set of disaggregated data (NCLB, 2002). This change to how data were collected made it easier to analyze the academic “achievement” of students with disability labels (Guilfoyle, 2006).

Mandated testing provided much more data regarding student "achievement." Not only did the data highlight the continued need to narrow the "achievement" gap between White students and African American students, but a spotlight was also shown brightly on the significant gaps separating students with disability labels from their peers without disability labels. In 2005, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that students without disability labels scored significantly higher than students with disability labels in both Reading and Math. In Reading, students without disability labels had an average score of 289 while students with disability labels had an average score of 244. Similarly, students without disability labels had an average score of 153 in Math while students with disability labels had an average score of 114.

Not only has the "achievement gap" remained, but there has also not been a significant narrowing of the gap between students without disability labels and their peers with disability labels. The trend of not having the gaps significantly narrow continued for reading achievement in 2009, 2013, and 2015. In each of these years, students without disability labels obtained an average standard score of 291, 292, and 291 whereas students with disability labels received average scores of 253, 252, and 252, respectively. During the same set of years, the "achievement gap" maintained in math as well. In each of these years, students without disability labels obtained an average standard score of 156, 157, and 155 while students without disability labels received average scores of 120, 119, and 118 respectively (USDOE, 2009, 2013, 2015).

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) attempted to narrow the "achievement gap" between students with disability labels and their peers without disability labels. Even with additional supports and Federal requirements, there has not been a significant narrowing of the "achievement" gap between students with

disability labels and their peers without disability labels (NCES, 2015). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is considered the nation's report card because it is the largest national representative, and continual, assessment to monitor student results in the United States (NCES, 2015). The results of the NAEP from 2003-2017 have not shown a significant narrowing of the "achievement" gap between several subgroups of students (NCES, 2015).

The previous section acknowledged that the "achievement gap" between students with and without disability labels has not significantly narrowed even though students with disability labels are being exposed to more time in the general education environment compared to at any other time in history. However, I noted that the use of standardized assessments as metrics for "achievement" are faulty. Furthermore, I highlighted that there are many circumstances of life and conditions of learning that influence student "achievement", which contribute to an opportunity gap. In the next section I will discuss some of the barriers that school leaders must consider and address to improve the academic "achievement" of all students.

What Barriers Do School Personnel Need to Address to Increase Student "Achievement"?

The previous section examined the "achievement" gap to show that there has not been a significant narrowing of the gap between students with disability labels and students without disability labels. Additionally, recent legislation (NCLB, 2001; ESSA, 2015) has used the "achievement" gap as one of the measures to hold schools accountable. The "achievement" gap is the product of many other factors that influence student "achievement." The following sections will examine different barriers that need to be addressed to improve the academic "achievement" of students with disability labels.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that the "achievement" gap is a symptom of larger gaps within the education system such as a lack of teacher preparation or a small social network for

students who have been marginalized. The “achievement” gap is often used to debate the effectiveness of schools and is used as a measure for school accountability (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Burris & Welner, 2005; Corn, 2006; Hill et al., 2017; Ornstein, 2010). The NAEP has the capability to identify school results, but it does not identify the causes for the discrepancies in student “achievement” (Connor, 2019; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Gallagher, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012).

Focusing solely on student outcomes perpetuates a deficit-based ideology by placing the primary responsibility for the academic outcomes on the student instead of addressing the barriers that cause the academic results (Ladson-Billings et al., 2017; Slee et al., 2019; St. John et al., 2017). Connor et al. (2019) argued that current research needs to take an intersectional approach that acknowledges the complex patterns in human experiences and how school systems must change to develop equitable access to opportunities for all students. For instance, Flores, and Gunzenhauser (2018) believed stakeholders should focus on system input instead of solely on student output. The term Opportunity Gap is a conceptual framework that acknowledges that systems impact student learning and should be changed to better support the education of all students (Connor, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; Pfeffer, 2018).

Milner (2012) argued that an opportunity gap framework analyzes how societal constructs influence student “achievement.” This framework holds educators accountable for removing barriers and providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. A criticism of the “achievement” gap is that it identifies White middle-class students without disability labels as the norm and compares all other groups to this benchmark (Capper & Young, 2014; Connor et al., 2019; Gorski, 2016). Additionally, Okun (2021) argued that the school system was developed from the perspective of a White supremacy culture (e.g., perfectionism, objectivity,

individualism, urgency, quantity over quality, and worship the written word) that privileges the students that resemble those in power and disparages historically marginalized groups. The opportunity gap framework forces us to view non-White middle-class students with a deficit lens and places a greater emphasis on the student instead of the barriers within a system (Asch, 2001; Gillborn, 2015; Gorski, 2016; Rojas & Liou, 2017). Milner (2017) explained that the following barriers are all socially constructed and influence academic "achievement":

- Equity-based professional development
- Teacher beliefs
- School support structures
- Lack of equity conversations in schools
- Community-based partnerships

Flores and Gunzenhauser (2018) proclaimed that school leaders have a key role in improving academic "achievement" through recognizing and understanding the barriers affecting student "achievement." Each of the previously noted factors affecting academic "achievement" will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Lack of Equity-Based Professional Development

One of the barriers that influences the academic "achievement" of students with disability labels is teachers not receiving the appropriate preparation to instruct students with a spectrum of learning needs. Stronge and Hindman (2003) wrote "many other school-related factors all contribute to school improvement and student achievement…but the single most influential school-based factor is the teacher" (p. 48). The professional practices of a teacher, and their beliefs regarding student learning, are two important factors that influence the quality of a teacher (Cobb & Sharma, 2015; Dematthews, 2015; Harbour et al., 2015; Kilday et al., 2016).

This section will discuss the barriers school leaders and educators must address to sustain equity-based professional development to better prepare teachers.

Lack of Consistent and Persistent Equity PD. An analysis of the 2013 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) revealed that students with disability labels, students from low SES, and students with limited English proficiency are more likely to receive their instruction from teachers with less experience and qualifications. In addition to having less experienced teachers, Naraian and Oyler (2013) noted schools with a greater population of students with disability labels have higher degrees of teacher turnover. School principals cannot be content with delivering professional development on improving student equity over the course of a single school year because it will be a challenge to keep support structures in place when there may be high levels of new staff members each year (Beard, 2018; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018; Luschei & Jeong, 2018; Naraian & Oyler, 2013).

In addition, when school administrators implement reform without continued professional development, Mcintosh et al. (2016) reported many schools abandon reform efforts before seeing positive outcomes. They also reported that when staff are exposed to continual change without continued professional development, there is a snowball effect of a decrease in implementing practices with fidelity. Furthermore, Mayes and Gethers (2018) noted that long-term success for reform efforts was often influenced by the school leader's ability to communicate a clear school vision along with sharing long-term goals. If school leaders continue to implement new school reforms, then staff professional development is less likely to be successful because the vision for the school and long-term goals will continually be changing.

Inadequate Time for Staff Collaboration. Many teachers want to support students with disability labels in their classroom; however, they report that administration often does not provide them with the required tools to be successful (Bronson & Dentith, 2014; Mandel & Eiserman, 2016; Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). Gavish (2017) identified that efforts to implement inclusive education is often done quickly and to a moderate degree. For example, teachers are often paired in co-teaching partnerships without being provided time to collaborate or to define their roles (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Friend, 2008; Gavish, 2017). Developing time during the school day for staff to collaborate in order to differentiate curriculum is often cited by school administrators as a barrier to implementing inclusive education (Mandel & Eiserman, 2016; Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Nichols et al., 2010). A lack of collaboration time is especially problematic at the secondary level when the gap in content knowledge widens between general education and special education staff (Murdock et al., 2016; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

In addition to a lack of persistent and consistent equity-based professional development, a lack of time to collaborate with colleagues leaves teachers unprepared to meet the needs of the range of learners in their classroom (Brown & Zhang, 2016; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Gilmour, 2018). School leaders need to address these barriers in order to develop effective equity-based professional development that prepares teachers to implement inclusive practices that will benefit a range of learners.

Deficit-Based Beliefs Focused on Student Inability

The medical model of students with disability labels is a viewpoint that still currently exists. Student "achievement" can be significantly influenced by the beliefs teachers hold. If school staff hold a deficit-based lens of students with disability labels, they believe that the

problem is due to deficiencies within the student, and they fail to analyze the current system and reflect on what changes could be made to meet the needs of the student.

Uncovering Own Unconscious Biases. Milner (2012) identified a significant role of school staff as recognizing their identity and the identity of their students. Connor (2017) asserted that some school staff accept that inequities are inherited and there is little that can be done to change that current system. However, Connor (2017) argued that individuals need to be cognizant of their own personal beliefs and biases because acknowledging that these biases exist is the starting point for change. Furthermore, Freidus and Noguera (2017) noted that if teachers maintain their deficit-based biases towards students with disability labels, they will be less likely to understand the value these students bring into the classroom and will be less likely to provide various entry points in order for all students to have access to the curriculum.

In addition to uncovering personal biases, Hattie (2011) stressed recognizing the value of student experience is an important aspect of student learning because prior experiences help students formulate a foundation for their learning. When teachers do not take the time to better understand the experiences of their students or how the result of these experiences may manifest in the classroom, teachers have the potential of misinterpreting student ability or behavior. For example, Gillborn (2015) noted the experience of an African American student attending a middle school. Teachers misinterpreted the student's poor academic performance and attempted to refer the student for special education because the teachers believed the student had dyslexia. When the parent took her child to a local hospital for additional assessments, it was discovered the student had a hearing impairment and not dyslexia.

Students enter the classroom with many different experiences and if teachers do not reflect on how this gap in human experience may impact the students' access to the curriculum,

then the teachers may view some students as less capable than others (Cobb & Sharma, 2015; Connor, 2017; Gorski, 2017). Plucker et al. (2018) noted students from various SES homes may have access to different experiences. For example, students from high SES may have the opportunity to attend summer enrichment activities or visit various museums. However, Yosso (2005) argued that students who may not have the same opportunities as high SES students bring just as much value to the classroom through their own experiences. For example, students that overcome obstacles in their community may bring resiliency into the classroom. It is the responsibility of the teacher to better understand their students' experiences and incorporate curriculum that complements those experiences otherwise the teachers will perpetuate the system of privileging some experiences while marginalizing others (Capper & Young, 2014; Katsarou et al., 2010; Lynn, 2002).

Teacher Expectations. When staff view students with a deficit-based lens, they often place lowered expectations on those students. Rojas and Liou (2017) wrote "teachers resort to lowering expectations for learning as a method to communicate their understanding of the students' struggles" (p. 29). As a result of lowered expectations and implicit biases, students may receive the message that they are not capable and show poorer academic performance. For example, Mayer et al. (2018) observed 26 teachers to learn how teacher-student interactions differed in a high-tracked class compared to a low-tracked class. Results of the classroom observations indicated that teachers demonstrated higher student expectations in the higher-tracked classes compared to the lower-tracked classes. For example, teachers in the high-tracked classes would use a warmer voice tone when meeting with students along with providing opportunities to process through classwork. Teachers in the low-tracked classes often used a firmer tone with the students and were quick to provide answers to students rather than walk

through the steps to solve problems. In addition to more support, students in the high-tracked classes were provided assignments involving higher-level activities whereas students in low-track classes were provided rote tasks such as copying vocabulary words. Overall, the observations suggested students were more engaged with the classroom topic when teachers held high expectations for their students.

Lack of a Strong School Support Structure

In addition to a deficit-based school culture developing barriers for academic success and equitable opportunities, the lack of a strong school support structure can hinder opportunities for students with disability labels (Katsarou et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Schools have the potential to either have institutional agents perpetuate a system of maintaining barriers for students with disability labels or work to remove barriers and provide access to equitable opportunities (Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Gorski, 2016; Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Developing strong teacher-student relationships so that teachers can aid students to reach their goals in a variety of ways is the essence of creating a strong support structure.

Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships. The development of student-teacher relationships is a vital component to student "achievement" (Blake et al., 2016; Harbour et al., 2015; Kilday et al., 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004; Mintrop & Zane, 2017). Understanding where students are coming from, developing trust with students, and advocating for the needs of students are crucial factors in developing a strong school support structure (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Freidus & Noguera, 2017; Modica, 2015). The current structures in place at schools often prevent this because of high teacher/student ratios, scheduling conflicts, and the roles of adults in the building.

Rethinking Traditional Structures to Develop Flexibility Based on Student Need. The traditional school structure that is designed for the masses does necessarily benefit all students (Connor et al., 2019; Gallagher, 2004; Ladson-Billings et al., 2017). Students may need a variety of supports. For example, traditional ideas around homework may not fit with the resources available to the student, and therefore expectations on the part of the school may have to be rethought (Domina et al., 2016; Hattie, 2011; Milner, 2012). Typically, high school classrooms are structured so that all students are expected to follow and complete the same workload (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013).

When teachers assign homework to students, there are a lot of assumptions being made. For example, teachers assume students have access to necessary supplies such as a computer, or even a quiet work environment (Blanchett et al., 2009; Pfeffer, 2018; Plucker et al., 2018). When school personnel maintain traditional beliefs that focus on, for example, strict due dates and the same workload for all students, instead of developing an understanding of individual circumstances, this can perpetuate an inequitable situation between and amongst students (Chen et al., 2015; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Lalvani, 2015). By developing greater flexibility within the school structure, school staff can meet the needs of students based on the individual circumstances of the student. For this to be successful, a support system must be in place that provides staff with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of their students (Kurth et al., 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Sailor, 2015).

In addition to better understanding the individual circumstances of students, Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) noted students felt a greater level of connectedness to their school when they view teachers cared about their academic success. Furthermore, Kilday et al. (2016)

noted the environment teachers create in their classrooms impacted the engagement of their students. For example, when teachers provided emotional support for their students by taking time to listen to student needs, the students were more likely to actively participate in class. In addition to fostering teacher-student relationships to improve academic success, developing a strong support system at school can assist students with being prepared for postsecondary success.

Postsecondary Planning. Many families do not have equal access to supports and connections outside of school; therefore, school-based supports for postsecondary planning are essential to help disadvantaged students, such as students with disability labels, apply to and attend institutions of higher education or develop the skills to be career ready (Cavendish et al., 2017; Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Furthermore, Townsend et al. (2018) suggested that teachers share their postsecondary planning experiences to help provide a framework for students who do not have access to the necessary resources at home. For example, when parents did not attend college, it is more challenging for them to provide the same level of support as parents who had the opportunity to obtain higher education (Farmer-Hinton, 2006; Gillborn, 2015; Lewis, 2001; Townsend et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005; Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

There is a tremendous need to better prepare students with disability labels for additional educational opportunities after high school in order to develop the skills necessary for employment. There is a significant discrepancy between levels of employment for individuals with and without disability labels (Bouck & Joshi, 2016; UDOC, 2015). The U.S. Department of Commerce Annual Social and Economic Supplement (2015) identified 27 percent of 25- to 64-year-olds with disability labels were employed compared to 77 percent of individuals without disability labels.

Park and Bouck (2018) identified that many students with disability labels were not being adequately prepared for employment during high school. For example, students with disability labels were often given direction regarding how to look for jobs (74%) instead of receiving guidance on creating a plan to develop skills in order to gain and maintain employment (58.4%) when they met with adults at their school. Having fewer relationships at school not only has the potential to hinder the student's current academic progress, but it may also stunt the student's potential at the post-secondary level by not adequately preparing the student with the skills to be successful once they have completed high school (Wagner & Davis, 2006).

Lack of Sustained Equity Conversations in Schools

Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, the percentage of public-school students who were White decreased from 54 to 47 percent (U.S. Dept. of Educ., 2020). This change in demographics marked the first time that minoritized students exceeded that of White students, making it imperative that schools are designed with all students in mind (Abraham et al., 2021; Welton, Diem, & Holme, 2015). Fabionar (2020) argued there is a need for increased understanding of how school leaders should respond to this shift in demographics and work as social justice change agents.

Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) wrote that "addressing issues of race in schooling, school leaders' heightened awareness of institutional racism is important in order to effectively create a school climate of openness and intellectual rigor and develop strategies for closing the achievement gap." The authors argued that school leaders cannot close "achievement" gaps on curriculum alone. They must be willing to engage in conversations with school members to develop a better understanding of racial discrimination, biases, inequities, and other forms of institutional racism. Research suggests that school leaders often face the following stages when

working to address racial issues in their schools: a) race consciousness; b) race neutral discourse; and c) resistance to race-based discourse (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Jackson, 2011; Theoharis, 2007).

Race Consciousness. Being race conscious is the first step in the process to dismantle racist practices and to ensure more equitable access to learning opportunities in schools (Picower, 2009; Shelton & Barnes, 2016). Swanson and Welton (2019) defined a person to be race conscious "if they are able to readily identify the problems associated with racism and are willing to participate in critical discussions about race. Moreover, school leaders who strive to be race conscious continuously undergo the process of unlearning racially oppressive habits of the mind and practices" (p. 736). In addition to school leaders being willing to engage in critical discussions about race, they must strive to help school members gain an awareness of the racist practices as well. DeMatthews et al. (2021) identified that the crux of systematic action towards eliminating racist practices in the school is for school leaders to encourage school members to be antiracist.

Antiracism. Antiracism works to defeat racism at the individual and institutional levels (Shelton & Barnes, 2016; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Individual racism in school is the individual mindset and practices of school members that puts certain racial groups in harm. For example, Gooden and O'Doherty (2015) discussed that when a teacher constantly only punishes African American students for showing the same behaviors as White students, then that would be individual racism. Institutional racism is the failure of school leaders to address racist practices at the school. For example, institutional racism is when school leaders identify a pattern of African American boys being suspended at a greater rate than the White students by that teacher but fails to intervene.

Like racism, antiracism occurs at both the individual level and the institutional level (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) argued that antiracism at the individual level works to disrupt the belief system that provides harm to marginalized racial groups. At the institutional level, school leaders who exhibit an antiracist mindset work to remove the structures in place that continue the racism imbedded in schools. At many schools, there will be a range of individual antiracism. At any given time, school members may be at various levels of understanding of antiracism. Levy et al. (2016) found that when school members do not collectively have antiracist beliefs, there can be a detrimental impact on the well-being of students of color. Furthermore, when a school leader finds that there are school members who resist an antiracist belief system then they tend to communicate with race neutral discourse.

Love (2019) wrote "As educators, we need to think of accountability beyond testing and academic achievement, and in terms of human suffering (p. 122)." She argued that educators with privilege need to be responsible for making sure that students of color benefit from the school system. Teachers must develop pedagogy that challenges Whiteness and injustices. Love argues that the current school system should be rebuilt with a focus on student equity. The only way to rebuild a more equitable school system is for school members critically reflect on the history of the United States to better understand how racism is embedded in the current system.

Race Neutral Discourse. Race neutrality is a color-blind ideology that ignores that race places a role with inequity, practices, and systems put in place at an institution (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Welton et al., 2015). Individuals who hold a race neutral perspective believe that racism is a belief that is held by individuals and minimizes the institutional explanations for racism. Gooden and O'Doherty (2015) argued that school leaders often enter conversations with

school members with good intentions to help them become antiracist educators; however, they often retreat to race neutral discourse to alleviate discomfort or to avoid tensions with colleagues.

For example, Swanson and Welton (2019) conducted a case study of two principals attempting to lead conversations to disrupt inequity at their schools. The principals strived to hold conversations with their predominantly White staff to develop a culture of antiracism. One of the principals recognized that "as a White person you do not have to think about your race, how people perceive your race, and that you can deflect all of those issues of racism onto people of color" (p. 744). The principal began to hold conversations with his faculty about equity and social justice. During these conversations, he found that many school members had misgivings about equity and felt that the schoolwide vision for equity was not clear. To strike a balance between maintaining relationships with his faculty and building professional capacity on equity, the principal reflected that he often took the race neutral route whenever he began to feel that he was making his faculty uncomfortable. The second principal avoided difficult dialogue on race with his faculty by presenting school-wide data in aggregate form and avoiding the difficult conversations by disaggregating data by groups of students.

Another example of race neutrality is viewing marginalized racial groups with a deficit-based lens. For example, Welton et al. (2015) conducted a case study examining the impact of suburban diversification on school districts. They found that district leaders were uncomfortable with discussing issues of race. District leaders used vague terms when discussing race without demonstrating an understanding of the complexities of how institutional racism exists. Furthermore, they minimized cultural differences among students by classifying students into

broad categories of "minority" or "at risk." Although the district leaders were uncomfortable talking about race, they were extremely concerned with tracking racial data due to the pressure being placed upon them from state accountability measures. They had a negative view of certain racial groups because they felt that an increase in certain groups would create a greater challenge to meeting specific academic thresholds. Conversations to improve academic outcomes of students did not acknowledge a need for antiracist instruction, but instead, focused on supporting special education, ESL, and economically disadvantaged students.

Resistance to Race-Based Dialogue. Racial resistance is defined as "explicit and intentional actions to thwart race conscious or antiracist work" (Swanson & Welton, 2019, p. 738). Discussions on race can often generate uncomfortable emotions and may even foster feelings of guilt, shame, or anger. Many individuals may understand how racism impacts someone's life; however, they may fail to understand one's own prejudices. Picower (2009) contended that individuals often implement:

> A variety of 'tools of Whiteness' in an effort to maintain their prior hegemonic understandings...and dominant ideologies of race, which in turn, uphold structures of White supremacy. In an attempt to preserve their hegemonic understandings, participants used these tools to deny, evade, subvert, or avoid the issues raised (pp.204-205).

Using these tools is a resistance strategy to avoid uncomfortable conversations regarding race and one's own role in the current systems in place that marginalize specific groups of students.

Three 'tools of Whiteness' include emotional, ideological, and performative tools. Emotional tools are based on an individual's emotions and may appear to be defensive. For example, school leaders may attempt to avoid feeling guilty by minimizing the role of race when discussing student outcomes (Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019; Welton et al.,

2015). Furthermore, White school members may alleviate feelings of guilt when engaging in racial dialogue by stating that they do not need to apologize for being born White or by sharing that they were never slaveholders. These examples are tools that individuals may use to deflect feelings of guilt regarding White privilege (Picower, 2009; Theoharis, 2007).

Ideological tools are when individuals share mainstream beliefs that allow them to avoid ant-racist positions. For example, Shelton and Barnes (2016) discovered that preservice teachers avoided difficult conversations on race by stating that "issues of race had been historically resolved" (p. 170). Additionally, during focus groups the preservice teachers would often work together to silence any individual who attempted to discuss race. For example, "each time Andy brought up race, the group worked collectively to argue and to silence her...Audrey, during her individual interview, said, 'each time she brings up topics like immigration and race and stuff, I just feel attacked. That bothers me'..." (p. 171).

Performative tools are the actions individuals do based on their beliefs. Individuals enacting performative tools share examples of how they help people of color. When individuals share these stores, there is usually a pecking order with themselves positioned at a higher status than the people of color. For example, Swanson and Welton (2019) found when a principal executed professional development workshops focused on racial equity, school members protested and claimed that the material was offensive. They argued that teachers were already doing a lot of excellent work at the school and that future workshops should only focus on the positive initiatives that teachers have already implemented instead of "the negative, and that rehashing key concepts about race and racism does not lead to actual change" (p. 751).

Disrupting the status quo in schools is challenging and takes a well-developed plan (Abraham et al., 2021). Even when school leaders are committed to anti-racist

practices, systemic change can be thwarted by faculty members who are uncomfortable discussing issues of race (Katz-Amey, 2019; Swanson & Welton, 2019). Many school leaders resort to using race-neutral discourse when school members begin to resist antiracist practices (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). Love (2019) argues that educators must hold each other accountable and continue to challenge the current structures to ensure that social justice is restored for those that have not benefited from the current system.

Lack of School-Community Partnerships

In this section, I will be discussing the importance of school-community partnerships in order to provide more equitable opportunities for students. I will define school-community partnerships and identify their importance for helping students become more aware of opportunities for them in their community. Additionally, I will discuss how developing partnerships with community organizations can increase school resources. Finally, I will explain the need for school staff to help parents navigate different agencies in their community.

Authentic Experiences and Leveraging Resources. O'Connor and Daniello (2019) defined a school-community partnership as a "case of educational partnership involving interactions and relationships between a school personnel member (typically a teacher, administrator, or staff member) and/or students in a school setting and a community member or organization working towards academic or nonacademic outcomes" (p. 298). Developing a partnership with the community has the potential to positively impact student learning through direct interaction with community members and organizations or through developing connections with organizations to procure additional resources.

If community members are an active part of the school, for example, teaching units in their areas of expertise, students have the potential to benefit from understanding how

individuals like themselves found success. For example, Modica (2015) discussed the experience of an African American student who shared that he did not enroll in honors classes because he did not see many African American students enrolling in those types of classes. Developing community partnerships has the potential to expose students to people from their local context who can be role models for success (Capper & Young, 2014; Lynn, 2002; St. John et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Not only do school-community partnership have the potential to provide students with a narrative to how individuals in their own community found success, but school can also develop partnership to increase access to more equitable opportunities (Angelle, 2017; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019; Olson, 2018). For example, Miranda et al. (2018) shared how one principal was able to generate more resources by connecting the school with the greater community. The principal partnered with local organizations to offer additional resources such as after school tutoring, job shadowing opportunities for students, and authentic learning experiences in the community. Furthermore, Alvarez and Mehan (2006) noted how a high school partnered with a local university in order to provide professional development opportunities that were focused on research-based strategies to improve student "achievement."

Navigating Outside Agencies. The National Council on Disability (2012) found that only thirty-eight percent of students with disability labels were engaged in their community. This finding suggests that students with disability labels do not have the same access to community resources as students without disability labels. Oertle and Seader (2015) suggested that families of students with disability labels often struggle to utilize community resources because many of the services involve many different agencies and government regulations.

Furthermore, families of students with disability labels may not be aware of the services available to help their child with a disability label such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) (Wehman, 2011; Zion & Sobel, 2014). In addition to not being aware of the available resources, assistance is often necessary to facilitate communication amongst agencies (Papay et al., 2015). If students are unable to access these services, they may be denied opportunities such as employment, a post-secondary education, or financial assistance (Hicks & Knollman, 2015; National Council on Disability, 2012; Wehman, 2011).

In this section, I discussed the barriers that school leaders must address in order to deliver an equitable education to students with disability labels (Connor, 2017; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Mandel & Eiserman, 2016; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). In the following section, I discuss ways in which these challenges have been addressed.

What Structures Support Students with Disability Labels?

In this section I will discuss what school leaders can do to provide more equitable access for students with disability labels. First, I will discuss how school leaders can utilize professional development to prepare teachers to differentiate curriculum to meet students at different entry points. Next, I will discuss how leaders can initiate an asset-based ideology that works against ableism. Following a discussion on developing an assets-based ideology, I will discuss how school leaders can implement a strong school support system to benefit all students. Finally, I will identify strategies school leaders can use to increase resources through community partnerships.

Professional Development to Service All Learners

In this section, I will discuss how school leaders can implement professional development that address culturally relevant practices along with a discussion on how school

staff can share individual professional knowledge. Teachers need to understand the role of a student's identity and incorporate it into the curriculum (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Thomas-Fair, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) claimed that teachers should develop curriculum that promotes culturally relevant teaching.

Culturally Relevant Professional Development. Capper and Frattura (2009) wrote "we need to reconceptualize good teaching to mean teaching that is composed of culturally relevant instruction and instruction that is differentiated to various student learning needs" (p. 93). Acknowledging student differences in the classroom can be a valuable tool to help students. For example, Freidus and Noguera (2017) observed an English class where the teacher explicitly discussed the impact of SES, race, disability, and the struggles individuals often encounter. The teacher identified differences as a social construct and not an individual deficiency. The students said that they felt more connected to the class because they had something to add to the rest of the class. Intersections involving sexuality, social class, gender, disability, and religion can affect student "achievement" (Blanchett et al., 2009; Gillborn, 2015; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Considering how these categories affect students and finding a way to incorporate these differences in the class curriculum can lead to a more accepting classroom environment (Capper & Young, 2014; Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Dematthews, 2015).

Developing Co-Serving Teams. Capper and Frattura (2009) suggested that instead of placing the responsibility of serving students with disability labels on a few teachers who are willing to enter a co-teaching partnership, all staff members should own the responsibility of educating the students attending the school. School leaders should work to develop classrooms that match the demographics of the school (Ennis & Katsiyannis, 2018; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Jokinen, 2018). For example, if 15 percent of the school

consists of students with disability labels, then 15 percent of every class should consist of students with disability labels. In order to prepare teachers to have classrooms that reflect the enrollment of their school, administrators should implement professional development opportunities throughout the school year that includes how to develop a curriculum that is differentiated to meet the needs of all students (Friend, 2016; Gavish, 2017; Kurth et al., 2015; Theoharis & Causton, 2014).

Frattura and Capper (2016) recommended that school leaders should implement the use of co-serving teams in place of co-teaching to provide services to students with disability labels. Capper and Frattura (2009) defined co-serving teams as grade level teams that consist of general educators, special education teachers, interventionists, student services staff, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, etc. Within these teams, the staff members share knowledge and expertise with one another to intentionally increase the teaching capacity of each other to better educate all learners (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Friend, 2008; Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2016). This method to develop co-serving teams compared to co-teaching teams increases the teaching capacity of all teachers instead of having general education teachers becoming overly reliant on special education teachers to support students with disability labels (Capper & Frattura, 2009).

For co-serving teams to be implemented effectively, administrators can work to build time into the staff's schedule to co-plan with one another (Hattie, 2011; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Administrators can assist the co-serving teams by providing a curriculum planning outline that forces the team to consider different entry points for students to access the curriculum (Frattura & Capper, 2016; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Kurth et al., 2015). For example, Sailor (2015) suggested administrators could utilize a framework such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to develop lessons that meet the needs of all learners

(Capper & Frattura, 2009). Frameworks such as UDL emphasize the importance of developing lessons through authentic experiences and providing opportunities for students to express what they have learned through multiple modes of representation. Hamilton-Jones and Moore (2013) argued frameworks such as UDL guide educators to become more proactive in identifying areas where students may struggle and plan to differentiate those areas.

Thoughtful curriculum development is vital to student success because what teachers do in the classroom greatly affects the academic "achievement" of the students (Cobb & Sharma, 2015; Harbour et al., 2015; Hattie, 2011; Young & Luttenegger, 2014). For example, Dotterer and Lowe (2011) used data from the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) to understand the impact of the classroom environment on student learning. The researchers found that classroom context was an important predictor of student engagement and learning. Instructional quality, socioemotional climate of the classroom, and student-teacher relationship quality were all correlated with academic and behavior engagement. Additionally, Kilday et al. (2016) reaffirmed the importance of the social environment and teacher-student interactions in the development of students' motivation, engagement, and academic "achievement." The researchers argued that teachers need to continue to improve their teaching practices to meet the needs of their students along with the teachers undergoing continual reflection to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their current practice.

Developing Assets-Based Beliefs

For school leaders to address inequities within the structure of the school, they need to understand their own identities (Frattura & Capper, 2016). Ainscow (2005) identified that an important characteristic of inclusive education is to remove barriers in order to create more equitable access. For school personnel to remove barriers, they must first acknowledge that

barriers exist. Once staff acknowledge that barriers exist, Naraian and Schlessinger (2018) assert school leaders should lead a reflection on the role each staff member plays in perpetuating the status quo.

Critical Self-Reflection. Atkins (2016) wrote that critical self-reflection is needed to assess the philosophies of school personnel and to understand how decisions influence the current structures in place. Gorski (2016) stressed that teachers often have a deficit-based perspective of students, which justifies inequalities present in power structures and places the blame for low “achievement” on the families instead of the system in place. An assets-based ideology focuses on the strengths of the students and identifies things that the student can achieve (Ainscow, 2005; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Hattie, 2011; Moll et al., 2005). School leaders can share their experiences with critical self-reflection and share how they worked to address biases they may have had regarding students with disability labels (Del Carmen Salazar, 2008; Gillborn, 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). Furthermore, they can share examples on the many strengths students with disability labels have and how those strengths can be cultivated in the general education classroom (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Gallagher, 2004; Kurth et al., 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

School leaders have a role in challenging the existing structures in their schools and work to develop new structures that provides equitable access for all (Cavendish et al., 2017; Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn, 2002; Milner, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2009) argued that personal knowledge, and beliefs, are the driving force for professional practice. If teachers actively work to monitor and understand how their decisions perpetuate the marginalization of students with disability labels, then they can become advocates to change the system (Beard, 2018; Cobb & Sharma; DeMatthews, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Connor (2017) described how critical self-reflection can be a method to address ableism within their professional practice. For example, teachers can reflect upon their personal beliefs about the historical inequities that are based on a student's perceived disability label (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; DeMatthews, 2015). Furthermore, teachers can work to understand how societal inequities are formed and perpetuated (Capper & Young, 2014; Gillborn, 2015; Lewis, 2001; Milner, 2012; Pfeffer, 2018).

In addition, Rojas and Liou (2017) interviewed teachers, selected on the recommendations of their principals, to understand why the teachers experienced success with improving the academic "achievement" of students with various learning needs. The defining characteristics of the selected teachers were high expectations for all students and student empathy. The teachers described their need to self-reflect to understand the students' backgrounds and experiences in the context of deficit thinking and how that may lead to lowering expectations. One teacher claimed this critical self-reflection allowed him to develop empathy for students and he started to question the inequitable conditions in racially segregated schools. Another mentioned their belief that schools need to flood students with positive messaging and present them with role models who have achieved academic success. All the teachers shared that caring for students must be the focal point for social equality and all teachers should demonstrate high expectations and rigor to set a college-going culture.

Using Data to Drive Messaging. DeMatthews (2015) observed staff meetings held at a school where the principal was identified as one who demonstrated a commitment to implementing inclusive practices and removing the inequities that exist between groups of students. Observations of the staff meetings indicated the principal created a data-driven culture at the school and used the data to implement cultural changes. For example, when data were

presented to show that students with disability labels were performing below their peers without disability labels, it supplied a justification to change the way these students were being serviced. The change in school culture created an environment where school staff started to focus on how changes could be made at the school to meet the needs of specific groups of students such as those with disability labels.

Furthermore, Alvarez and Mehan (2006) analyzed a school that successfully used data to change its culture in order to decrease the "achievement" gap among its students. The Preuss School decided to eliminate tracked classes in order for all students to have the opportunity to have access to a rigorous curriculum. The school provided each of their teachers with portfolios detailing data on every student to inform decision-making. Instead of using student data as a tool to track students, the data was used to identify students in need of additional interventions or tutoring. The Preuss School collaborated with a local University to obtain additional resources to address tutoring, interventions, space, mentoring, and opportunities for a longer school day. In order to support students with disability labels, and other students previously placed in low track classes, the school provided ongoing professional development in the areas of differentiation, use of research-based practices, and provided time for staff collaboration. Eighty percent of the graduates in the inaugural class attended 4-year colleges the following fall and the remaining 20% enrolled in community colleges. The number of students who scored above the 50th percentile on the CAT/6 in both reading and mathematics ranged from 70% to 83% depending on the student's grade level.

School leaders can develop buy in with the school staff by working with them to develop a vision statement that promotes equitable access for all students (DeMatthews, 2015; Gorski, 2016; Katsarou et al., 2010). Furthermore, administration can collaborate with school staff to

develop a common mission that it is the role of everyone to instruct students will disability labels and administration can work to meet with staff throughout the school year to ensure staff are successfully implementing more inclusive teaching practices (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Moll et al., 2005; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012; Walsh, 2012; Wilson, 2016). Holding meetings throughout the school year to assist staff will help address any issues that may arise at any point of the year. Not only will holding check-ins throughout the year help address concerns, but it has the potential for staff to buy into the shift towards more inclusive practices by realizing that school leaders are dedicated to more school-wide inclusive practices (Frattura & Capper, 2016; Gavish, 2017; Theoharis & Causton, 2014).

Evidence suggests school leaders have a key role in creating schools that reduce the gaps in academic "achievement" (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). An important characteristic of a school leader that can improve student "achievement" is their disposition toward gap influences (Beard, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lozenski, 2017; Lynn, 2002; St. John et al., 2017). Flores and Gunzenhauser (2018) interviewed 20 principals to determine their disposition towards the opportunity gap. When principals used opportunity gap language, they took an asset-based approach grounded in the value of community whereas principals who referred to the "achievement" gap placed more responsibility on the student. Those with an opportunity gap disposition believed diversity was mutually enriching, used "us" and "we" when discussing an action plan, and felt getting to know the student and parents was an important aspect to developing resources to implement their action plan.

Developing School-Based Support Structure

Developing a strong support system within the school is a critical component to helping students with disability labels have a more equitable experience at the school (Castro-Villarreal

& Nichols, 2016; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Katsarou et al., 2010). Stanton-Salazar (2011) asserted the amount of school-based support a student obtains is an important indicator of a student's success. Farmer-Hinton (2008) defined school-based support as "a social network of teachers, counselors, and other staff who have the competence and desire to share institutional resources and opportunities" (p. 132).

Implementing a School-Wide Equity Audit. The district should complete an equity audit to understand the current structures in place and to better understand why they were initially implemented (Frattura & Capper, 2016; Theoharis & Causton, 2014; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Frattura and Capper (2016) defined an equity audit as a complete analysis of every aspect of the school district from the mission statement to more specific pieces such as student programming, district data, and allocation of district staff. As each component of the district is under analysis, individuals in a position of leadership should reflect upon whether the current structure is benefiting all students in the district or only specific groups of students. For example, if students with disability labels are not making progress in their academic courses, then district leadership should evaluate whether the current structure is equitably supporting students with disability labels (Cobb & Sharma, 2015; DeMatthews, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Slee et al., 2019). Once school leaders develop an understanding of the current structures in place, Mayes and Gethers (2018) suggested a visual model should be created that clearly identifies the current structures along with defining the goal of the new structural reorganization.

Developing Support Teams. DeMatthews (2016) suggested when the number of stakeholders connected to a student increase, there is the potential to access a wider net of resources to support the student. When families lack the necessary resources to assist their children with homework, or to provide educational experiences, the students may fall behind

their peers who have access to additional homework support or have the means to increase their educational experiences outside the school day (Connor, 2017; Kim, 2017; Milner, 2012; Thomas, 2016). Milner (2017) suggested that school staff can help identify students who may otherwise fall through the cracks by restructuring the resources currently existing within the school. Existing data can be used to screen and identify students who may require additional supports, and teams of school staff can work together to provide the necessary supports to help the student be successful (Connor, 2017; Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Pfeffer, 2018; Plucker et al., 2018).

The support teams that are developed to help individual students will work to develop a smaller community within the larger school building. The creation of smaller support teams will work to not have students fall through the cracks. Frattura and Capper (2016) proposed that smaller support teams can meet regularly to discuss data related to student progress along with developing a network of school personnel who are more invested with individual students. Members of the support teams can work to develop relationships with the student in order for the student to have adults within the school who they can meet with to discuss any problems or concerns. Furthermore, Turner et al. (2014) discussed that developing additional relationships within the school will help students feel a greater level of connectedness to their learning. Additionally, increasing the relationships that a student has within school can help to have school personnel get to learn about the student and better understand their individual circumstances.

Development of School-Community Partnerships

Farmer-Hinton (2002) proposed that the structure to fund schools needs to be altered to provide more opportunities to disenfranchised communities. Policies need to be put in place to address the actual needs of the schools and community. Schools with greater challenges and

needs should be provided adequate funding in order to effectively address those challenges. Reform efforts should be shifted toward addressing the types of instructional and social development processes that are required to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged communities. Policies should be developed holistically to not only address the direct needs within the school but also to address the contributing factors within the community. Funds could be allocated to develop partnerships among schools and city organizations such as local universities, religious institutions, or businesses.

Engaging in Partnerships with Youth Organizations. School leaders and educators can develop partnerships with local youth organizations to provide authentic experiences for students regarding social issues. Youth are organizing in schools to engage in activism towards economic, community and social issues. The youth who are engaging in activism are becoming leaders in schools and communities. One organization in Milwaukee that works with high school students is Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT). This community organization works with students in twelve Milwaukee Public High Schools. Along with community leaders and other organizations, members of LIT advocate for the following in schools: restorative justice practices, removing police presence in schools, an increase in support services in schools, an end to seclusion and restraint, smaller class size, and the use of culturally responsive pedagogy. LIT also focuses on economic issues and supports free tuition for college, paid internships for youth in the local community and fully funding public schools, instead of supporting cuts to school budgets. LIT focuses on empowering youth and building leadership skills within the community.

Partnering with Local Organizations. Developing community partnerships can be a method to increase vital resources while decreasing educational costs (Frattura & Capper, 2006; Frattura & Capper, 2016; Sindelar et al., 2006). For example, Bryk et al. (2010) analyzed two

elementary schools in Chicago to determine the factors that allowed the rise of test scores in one school while the other school did not demonstrate sustained academic growth. Results from this study found that the school that sustained academic growth partnered with local organizations such as universities and social agencies to foster long-term structures that met the needs of the students and their families. By partnering with local organizations, the school was able to share the financial burden of after school programs for an extended period of time. The other schools implemented many programs such as after school tutoring and weekend enrichment; however, since the school did not develop community partnerships, funding ran out and the programs were not maintained.

Olson (2018) identified challenges that principals must address in order to develop effective partnerships with community organizations. School leaders need to identify organizations that share a common vision with the school district. School leaders should also conduct thorough background checks of the organizations prior to engaging in a partnership in order to better understand the organization. Finally, there needs to be transparent communication to ensure that the initial objectives of the partnership are being met.

Postsecondary Planning. In addition to developing community partnerships to provide services and experiences to help students while they are attending high school, community partnerships can be utilized to help students with their postsecondary planning and preparation. School staff can work with local companies to develop experiences for students in order to help them develop a stronger understanding of their plans after they graduate from high school (Bouck & Joshi, 2016; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019). For example, Partnerships can be developed to offer internships or job shadow opportunities to different job sites within the community. Local companies can come into the high school for a job fair to discuss the

opportunities for students in the communities after they have earned their diploma. Furthermore, Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015) suggested that adults with disability labels should be brought into schools in order for students with disability labels to have exposure to individuals who resemble themselves and found success.

Due to the complicated needs of students with disability labels, school staff need to engage members of the community in order to prepare students with disability labels after high school (Mazzotti & Row, 2015; Oertle & Seader, 2015). Papay et al. (2015) argued the transition process should occur early in high school and include the support of the student, family, and community agencies. School staff should act as a liaison between families and community agencies that will help students with disability labels following high school such as Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. This well families maintain a point person who they can reach out to if they have questions or concerns since it can be difficult to manage communication between and amongst several different agencies.

Argument for Further Research

The summation of literature helps to provide some context for the need for school leaders to evaluate the success and barriers of the current structures in place to support students with disability labels. Historically, students with disability labels have been viewed through a deficit-based lens that has prevented them from accessing the same equitable academic opportunities as their peers without labels (Blanchett, 2010; Chen et al., 2015; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Modica, 2015; Shifrer, 2013). The literature reviewed here has outlined that, although students with disability labels are spending more time in the general education environment, they are still not being provided with the equitable opportunities as their peers without disability labels (Carson, 2015; EAHCA, 1975; IDEA, 1990; NCLB, 2015).

Despite some efforts to address the inequities between students with and without disability labels, there has been little change regarding student “achievement” between these two groups of students (NAEP, 2015; UDOE, 2012). There are several reasons cited in the literature that explain the factors influencing student “achievement.” Milner (2012) outlined that there are factors that need to be addressed in order to improve the academic “achievement” of marginalized students such as those with disability labels. While these recommendations are valuable to improve student “achievement”, there are many barriers to implementing a system that adequately provides supports to students with disability labels.

What is missing from the literature is a deeper analysis of how school leaders identify and address barriers to promote an inclusive school that meets the needs of all students. Furthermore, the literature is missing an understanding of how support services among staff are created and communicated to serve students with disability labels. The literature identified school leaders as an essential component to developing a school support structure that focuses on student ability and a belief that all students can be successful.

This study sought to explore the factors school leaders and educators consider when planning, scheduling, and implementing individualized supports for students with disability labels. Additionally, this study worked to identify the supports available to help staff become more equitable educators as well as the supports that were made accessible to students with disability labels. Finally, this study analyzed the process school personnel used to continually evaluate the successes and barriers of the current system.

Chapter III: Methods

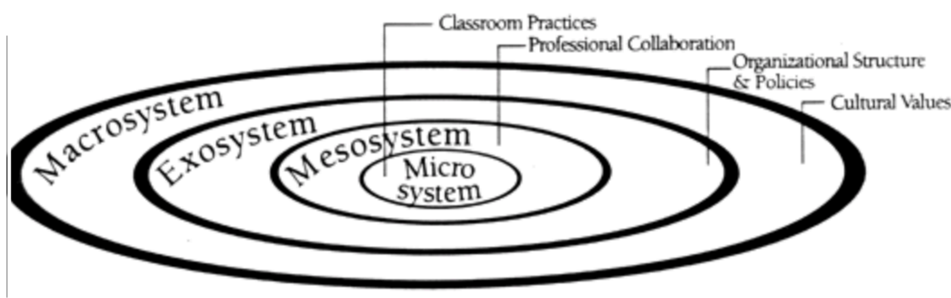
In this chapter, I will provide my rationale and justification for using my chosen qualitative methods. Next, I will outline my theoretical framework for this study. Following my theoretical framework, I will discuss the rationale for the research methods I used in this study. I will then share my positionality along with discussing the methods I implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Next, I will discuss the process I used for selecting the schools for this study along with how I selected my participants within each school. After I outline my process for selecting my participants, I will describe my data-collection protocols for collecting data through a series of semi-structured interviews and observations. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the process I used to conduct an analysis of my data.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory was used to understand how the beliefs of school leaders and educators impacted the school environment and influenced the ability to support students with "achievement" and provide equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that different layers of the environment influence the development of an individual. This theory divides the environment into five layers of interrelated ecological systems (see Figure 2): a) microsystem, b) mesosystem, c) exosystem, d) macrosystem, and e) chronosystem.

Figure 2

Layers of the Ecological System



Note. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in the school environment.

The microsystem relates to the setting that is the direct environment for an individual. This can include experiences and interactions that have direct contact with an individual such as peers, administrators, students, and parents. The mesosystem involves the relationships between the microsystems in an individual's environment such as professional collaboration. The exosystem is the setting in which there is a connection between the context of the individual's environment and the individual. For example, school leaders and educators at schools are bound by local and state policies such as graduation requirements, and state accountability measures. The macrosystem is the cultural climate of the individual's environment such as school culture. The chronosystem is the way an environment impacts an individual over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This theory helped to explain how the beliefs and biases of school leaders and educators (mesosystem) shaped the school structure (macrosystem) to support students with "achievement" and develop equitable access to opportunities for all students (microsystem). The beliefs and biases of school leaders and educators can influence both the practices of the teacher and the success of the student. Additionally, Critical Disability Theory was used as a framework to understand that disability is constructed by society. The school structure (macrosystem), and the beliefs of school leaders and educators (mesosystem) influence student supports and the accessibility of equitable opportunities for students with disability labels

(microsystem). Oliver (2013) described the differences between “impairment and disability” and argued disability is a social construct, whereas impairment is a functional limitation. School personnel can work to minimize barriers to allow students with disability labels access to opportunities.

I conducted interpretive research utilizing literature regarding research on inclusive practices, the opportunity gap, and school structures to create a methodological approach to analyze how school leaders and educators perceived “achievement” along with how they enabled continuous access to opportunities for students with disability labels. The current literature identifies that school leaders and educators at schools have many challenges that need to be addressed to provide access to students with disability labels both within the school building and out in the community.

Rationale for Research Design

Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote “we conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue” (pp. 45-46). The research questions of this study were explored through qualitative methods in order to address the complex nature of the problem studied. The aim of this study was to understand the processes school leaders and educators implemented to create continuous access to opportunities for students with disability labels. Additionally, I wanted to understand how schools perceived to provide access to opportunities viewed “achievement.” These complex interactions among and between school leaders and educators were measured through a series of interviews and observations.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote that interviews are “necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). Conducting semi-

structured interviews was an appropriate method to address the research questions that explored the thought processes of school personnel when creating access to opportunities and whether they continually reviewed and addressed the challenges that developed. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), observations are a "key tool for collecting data in qualitative research...noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer" (p. 166). In this study, observations were used to explore the dialogue between and among school leaders and educators when they made decisions on implementing equitable access to students with disability labels along with gaining a better understanding of the structure once implemented.

Semi-Structured Interviews

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), an interview is where "knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 4). I used semi-structured interviews as a primary source of data to gain insight on my participants' thoughts and beliefs regarding students with disability labels and their comfort level with providing equitable access to learning opportunities at their school (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since personal beliefs and experiences play a primary role in decision-making (Angelle, 2017; Brown & Zhang, 2016; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Miranda et al., 2018), it was important to better understand the perspectives and beliefs of those responsible for the development, and evaluation, of the practices utilized at the school.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) asserted that the role of interviews is to work to understand how the participant views the world and the meaning they develop from their experiences. Connor (2017) noted personal beliefs are the driving force to address inequitable situations and personal knowledge and experiences inform professional practice to seek change. To develop a better understanding of the personal beliefs and experiences of the participants in this study, I

conducted semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews helped me to better understand how the participants viewed their role at the school along with their motivations for their work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to developing a better understanding of the prior experiences of the participants, the semi-structured interviews were used as a tool to learn more about the current attitude of the participants in this study along with understanding their opinion on decisions that occurred at their school (Glesne, 2016). Flores and Gunzenhauser (2018) noted the disposition toward factors influencing the "achievement" gap determines whether school leaders and educators at the school will work to eliminate inequitable situations and strive to improve the "achievement" of all students. Furthermore, Milner (2012) stressed that if individuals do not recognize the importance of their own identity, or the identity of their students, they will be unable to reflect on how the current structures impact students in order to properly evaluate whether the current structures benefit all students or only a few.

Observations

I conducted observations of planning meetings that discussed and evaluated the utilization of individual student supports for students with disability labels. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that observations are a key tool for qualitative research and consist of "noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer, often with a note-taking instrument, and recording if for scientific purposes" (p. 166). The objective of the observations in this study were to explore the process and dialogue that occurred during the development and evaluation of the access students with disability labels had to equitable opportunities.

During my observations, I held the role of nonparticipant observer. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined this role as "the researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and

taking field notes from a distance" (p. 168). I was an outsider of the group, and I recorded data without being directly involved with the participants or their discussions (Glesne, 2016). Since I sought to better understand how school leaders and educators at a school that has been identified as one that provides equitable access to students with disability labels evaluated and discussed "achievement" and challenges, I was not involved with the planning meetings since I was not a contributor for the school being viewed as providing equitable access to opportunities.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote observations are useful to "notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding the context" (p. 139). The observations helped me to gather information about events that were not discussed during my interviews due to the events becoming a part of the participants' routine and may have gone unnoticed. Additionally, observations helped to provide context to specific events or behaviors that I used as a reference point for my post observation interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, when school leaders and educators referred to specific data points during their planning meeting, I addressed why the type of data was selected and understood their attitudes regarding the selected data.

A goal of observations is to "better understand the research setting, its participants, and their behavior" (Glesne, 2016, p. 67). For example, observations in this study helped me to better understand how school leaders and educators framed their discussions during meetings. Ainscow and Messiou (2018) discussed the importance of staff members taking responsibility for their role in student "achievement" along with making sure that students have equitable access to opportunities. Observations helped me to better understand whether staff discussions were framed with a student-deficit lens or an assets-based perspective.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the decision-making process that school leaders and educators used to determine practices that were implemented to assist students with disability labels. This study was designed using qualitative methods in response to the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders and educators at schools selected for this study perceive “achievement”?
2. What do school leaders and educators view as challenges to student “achievement”?
3. How school leaders and educators enable and create continuous equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels?
4. How are school leaders and educators supported in this work?

Positionality

Milner (2007) developed a series of questions researchers should consider prior to conducting research. A person must be aware of their own cultural heritage and acknowledge how it informs their understanding. Researchers need to be aware of how their experiences influence how they interpret other individuals and experiences. Researchers need to acknowledge their own biases and how they view the role of race and culture in society. Researchers need to have an understanding how prior experiences shape their research decisions and approaches. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote that the researcher’s “insider/outsider status can affect whether one has access to participants, as well as to the kinds of stories they will tell the researcher” (p. 63).

My racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world. As a White male raised in a middle-class household, I had the opportunity to take part in a variety of

experiences outside of school. My parents would take me to science enrichment activities during my summer vacations, and we went on family vacations to see various parts of the country. These educational activities influenced how I view school. I believe that my experiences outside of school helped me to perform well academically and to see the world through multiple perspectives. This viewpoint helped to shape my belief that schools should engage students with unique experiences and teach students to ask questions in order to be informed citizens. As a result of these experiences, I became curious about things beyond my immediate experience, and I may sometimes find it difficult to understand why students are not as curious as I would be in school.

As the son of a high school science teacher, academics were stressed as a useful tool to improve oneself. Doing well academically was highly valued in the home in which I was raised. I was often rewarded when I obtained high grades and attending college was an expectation with my family. Throughout my childhood, it was mandatory to participate in summer education enrichment activities. This upbringing contributed to my bias that attending postsecondary education is a key factor to improving one's position in society. Throughout my time as a graduate student and teaching in an urban district, I have become aware that there are many additional factors that contribute to one's social mobility. Additionally, I have developed a belief that "achievement" can be measured by methods other than school grades and standardized assessments.

Having a teacher as a parent not only helped to shape the value I place on education, but it also helped me to understand the importance of having access to resources outside of school. As a child, I took for granted that I had access to a teacher at home whenever I needed assistance with my homework. If my parents were unable to help me with my homework, then my father

would always guide me to a resource that would be of assistance. Growing up I assumed that all students had access to this resource. After I became a teacher, I developed an understanding that not every student has access to these resources at home. I also developed an understanding that it was not a result of a lack of caring when parents were unable to provide the same level of assistance that I received as a child. My experience working with families from various backgrounds helped to develop an educational ideology that school staff should work with families to provide access to resources that can be used at home.

I work to negotiate and balance my racial and cultural identity as a White, middle-class male by asking questions and being mindful when I begin to make judgements. Over time, I have become more self-aware when I begin to formulate judgements when I am teaching and conducting research. Asking questions forces me to slow down and work to reflect on why certain situations are taking place. For example, if a student is sitting at a desk not engaged with an assigned task, I reflect upon the factors that might be affecting their performance such as difficulties with comprehension, writing, focusing, or self-starting. It is important for me to understand that my educational experiences may be quite different from those of myself. I pair education with success and interesting experiences; not all others have this same association.

All individuals bring unique strengths and experiences to education. This belief shapes how I research special education. Students with disability labels are often analyzed from a deficit point of view. I work to conduct research with a perspective that views the strengths of students with disability labels. This perspective is especially important since students with disability labels spend the majority of their time in the general education environment (NCES, 2015). These students are being exposed to a more rigorous curriculum and analyzing student strengths

will help to understand teaching strategies to increase their engagement in the general education classroom.

The historical landscape of my racial and cultural identity is one of privilege and opportunity. As a middle-class white male, I have been provided opportunities that have not been available to other individuals. Being a member of the middle-class provided me the opportunity to use my financial resources to attend college and receive a graduate degree. Being a white male has provided me with power and opportunity not available to others. For example, I work and live in an environment surrounded by individuals who look like myself. I am able remain comfortable in my surroundings because I do not feel I need to act or present myself in a specific manner. Additionally, I seldom have my ability questioned by my peers, and I rarely feel excluded from important meetings or conversations. Furthermore, as a White male raised in a middle-class home, I benefited from the support of my family. For example, if I needed money to cover a semester of college, my parents could loan me money without interest.

After graduating from college, I worked in a group home for adults with an intellectual disability. This was my first experience working so closely with individuals with significant disabilities. This experience shaped how I interact with individuals with significant disability labels. I believe all people should be treated with dignity and respect regardless of perceived differences. Following my experience working in the group home, I taught a self-contained class for high school students with autism. Many of my students were nonverbal and not expected to learn very much at school. The curriculum was centered on life skills that would assist them to become more independent. I learned a lot about myself during this period of my life. The school I worked for was an urban high school and all my students and teacher aides were African American. Not only was this my first extensive interaction with students with significant

disability labels, but it was also my first time working in an environment where I was not a member of the majority culture. My views changed significantly after experiencing life outside a small White community. I discovered that I had to address my own prejudices that I was not aware existed prior to moving and working in an urban community.

Growing up, I spent a lot of my childhood visiting my relatives in a large urban community; however, my visits were limited to experiences that matched my White, middle-class background. My visits were limited to predominantly White neighborhoods where my relatives lived and watching baseball games. Furthermore, I was often exposed to stories about which neighborhoods to stay away from and news segments discussing the violence in the city. Most of these stories focused on individuals of color. These stories and experiences created an unknown prejudice against urban communities that I later had to acknowledge and address. I started to acknowledge that I had a prejudice against urban communities when I started teaching at an urban high school.

As a first-year teacher attending graduate school, the only apartment I could afford was an efficiency apartment located in a neighborhood that was predominantly African American. To get to my school of employment I had to drive an older car through many African American neighborhoods. There was one incident where my car broke down in an African American neighborhood, and I remember feeling uncomfortable and nervous. I walked to a local business to use their phone to call a tow truck, and I remember seeing bars and protective glass by the cashier. This was one of the first times that I remember actively reflecting on my thoughts and emotions regarding urban communities. I started to reflect that my emotions were based on unfamiliarity and previous stories that I had been told. As I continued to work with my colleagues and students, I became more familiar with the community I was now a part of, and

my anxieties began to lessen over time. Through conversations with my colleagues, I learned a lot about their values and many of the inequities that existed within the urban community. During my drives to work, it was hard to ignore the economic differences between neighborhoods that were predominantly White and those that were predominantly African American. Much of the new development was occurring in the neighborhoods that were predominantly White whereas predominantly African American neighborhoods had boarded up businesses and vacant properties. My first three years of teaching substantially shaped how I conduct my research. I believe all students should be treated with respect and provided an opportunity to grow and excel in school regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or disability label.

Following my three years working with students with significant disability labels, I worked at a high school implementing the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity (ICS) service delivery model. I was assigned to co-teach an inclusive chemistry class. The class consisted of approximately the natural proportions of the school population. Students with varying disability labels were instructed to students without disability labels in the general education environment. The curriculum was differentiated to meet the spectrum of learners enrolled in the class. This experience provided me the opportunity to observe that students with disability labels can be successful when provided with a rigorous curriculum alongside their peers without disability labels.

This experience helped to develop my belief that all students have the potential to learn and that the decisions made by school leaders and educators influence whether students meet their potential. Students with disability labels were provided equitable opportunities and professional development was implemented to help school personnel support all students in the

general education environment. Additionally, the general education teachers I worked closely with took ownership of the learning of all their students regardless of disability label. Department meetings were student-focused and thoughtfully planned to incorporate student strengths. I have a bias that critical reflection and developing ownership for student learning is an essential trait that school leaders and educators must have in order to develop equitable opportunities for all students.

My current school does not implement the ICS model and continues the practice of tracking students based on the student's perceived academic ability. Through my experiences working in a school that does not implement an ICS model compared to one that does, I witnessed a difference in the way school staff talk about students with disability labels. When a student receives a failing grade in a general education class, there is little work to critically examine the current systems in place. There have been decisions to create additional programs outside the general education environment instead of reflecting on how the general education environment can be changed to meet the needs of the student. I have a bias that students with disability labels should receive their education in the general education environment instead of being removed to specialized programs. I often feel uncomfortable when I see students with disability labels removed from the general education environment.

As a White, middle-class male special education teacher excelling in a Ph.D. program, I have been socialized to believe that "achievement" can be scored and measured in one way. For example, at my school the "achievement" gap is the focus of our discussion on student "achievement." I have been told that the goal of special education is to close gaps in the state assessments. When gaps are not closing between students with and without disability labels, this data is often used to justify the addition of specialized programs that remove students with

disability labels from the general education environment. My belief that all students have the ability to learn when proper supports are in place developed once I observed students with varying disability labels find success in challenging classes. I observed that the perspectives of teachers influenced whether differentiation occurred or how the student was framed in dialogue.

I have had the opportunity to teach in both urban and suburban school districts. At each of these school districts, I observed that many structures collude to create and maintain privilege and are difficult to break down. In both the urban and suburban districts where I was a special education teacher, students that were economically disadvantaged often had the longest bus rides to school. When the weather was poor, these students often missed their first hour class on a repeated basis. Additionally, these students often missed after school experiences due to their need to take the bus home. They missed after school homework help or the ability to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities. I have also witnessed marginalized students being guided into courses that prevent them from enrolling in advanced placement courses. Furthermore, some advanced classes that earn college credit require monetary payment that may prevent some students from enrolling in the class. I have a bias that school staff should work to eliminate barriers and not perpetuate a system that excludes some students from educational opportunities. I have a bias that school staff should challenge current structures and develop more equitable access to opportunities.

In terms of positionality with participants in this study, I selected school personnel who did not have prior knowledge of me personally or of my work as a special education teacher. When I contacted my participants by email, it was the first contact I had with any of the participants of the study. I chose participants who had no prior knowledge of my educational philosophy to have authentic responses when I interviewed my participants. Additionally, I

believed having unfamiliarity with my participants helped to keep them more relaxed and willing to provide authentic responses.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) contended an interview is where “knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 4). Since I was not familiar with my research participants, there was a possibility of misinterpreting the participants' responses. Since I worked in the same professional field as the participants in this study, there was a possibility that I could have made assumptions based on my experiences as an educator. To decrease the risk of misinterpreting responses to my questions, Creswell, and Poth (2018) recommended the implementation of an interview protocol. I asked follow-up questions for clarity and to receive further explanation to ensure that I fully understood what the participants attempted to convey.

Glesne (2016) described reflexivity as a critical reflection on how the researcher, participants, procedures, and environment all affect each other. The objective of research is to uncover answers to identified questions in our environment. Critical reflection is essential for researchers when conducting research because all variables need to be considered in order to identify the root causes of identified problems. Researchers need to self-reflect to identify their own biases in order to develop a protocol to reduce their influence over the results of the study.

I made sure that I was mindful of my ideologies and biases. I have a teaching ideology that the work of teachers is to remove barriers for all students and that students with disability labels should receive their instruction in the general education environment. I needed to be aware of this ideology during my interviews and observations, so I did not make assumptions or judgments based on what I observed or heard. I have a bias that “achievement” can be defined by more than a standardized math or reading score. I was mindful of my biases regarding student

“achievement” when this topic was discussed during my observations and interviews and did not make judgements. Additionally, I checked my bias regarding students receiving their instruction in the general education environment. I worked to not make assumptions if a student did not spend the full school day in the general education environment. I was cautious with my research in order to not analyze specific data and ignore other information in order to align with my ideologies and theories. When I analyzed and interpreted the data generated through my research, I asked questions to fully understand the circumstances of my study and the reasoning for the results. I kept my thoughts in check in order to not analyze or interpret data incorrectly. Asking follow-up questions and maintaining an open dialogue helped me ensure that I was accurately capturing the participant’s intent.

Trustworthiness

Researcher bias is a factor in qualitative research because “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). Previously, I discussed my positionality along with sharing my research bias as a special education teacher who believes all students should be given equitable opportunities to learn in school. In this study, I implemented several criteria to establish trustworthiness with the data I collected. Glesne (2016) asserted trustworthiness is a set of criteria used for assessing the quality of the study and ensures the data aligns with what actually occurred during the study.

In addition to documenting my positionality and researcher bias, I subjected my data collection to triangulation (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Glesne, 2016 & Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Glesne (2016) defined triangulation as “using more than one method for data collection and more than one type of respondent can contribute to eliciting more complex perspectives on an issue and to noticing more” (p. 152). For this study, the data-collection methods I implemented were

semi-structured interviews, observations, and documented field notes. I also used my interview and observation transcripts to write rich, thick descriptions that developed context for my interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, I used a colleague, as a peer reviewer, to perform an external check that kept myself honest with my research findings. The peer reviewer was a school principal who had experience with qualitative research and had recently obtained his doctorate degree in the field of education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Site Selection

I used a combination of typical sampling and snowball sampling in my research study. I implemented snowball sampling to identify schools that were identified in the community for demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" and providing equitable opportunities and supports for students with disability labels. Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) defined snowball sampling as being "used for difficult-to-access populations. In cases where groups are difficult to access, asking for referrals from participants can result in a robust sample size" (p. 38). I used snowball sampling to identify schools where "achievement" was defined by metrics other than the results of standardized assessments to cast a wider net of schools and perceptions of student "achievement."

I began my search by sending an initial email (see Appendix C) to local organizations and agencies asking them if they were able to identify any high schools that exhibited a high level of student "achievement." For example, I contacted the Boys and Girls Club, Voices de la Frontera, Urban Ecology Center, Disability Rights Wisconsin, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. After the organizations and agencies identified high schools that exhibited high levels of student "achievement", I conducted a follow-up phone call to verify that the high schools met my inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2

Site Selection Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
• High school has a minimum special education enrollment 10% of total enrollment (state avg. is 13%) • Organization rationale for "achievement" is based on evidence or example that can be verified	• High schools that have special education enrollment less than 10% of total enrollment • Organization does not provide verifiable examples or evidence

Note. Criteria outlined for a high school to be used in this study.

I continued to develop my list of organizations to contact as they were mentioned to me. I continued to contact local organizations and agencies until I developed a robust list of 13 high schools.

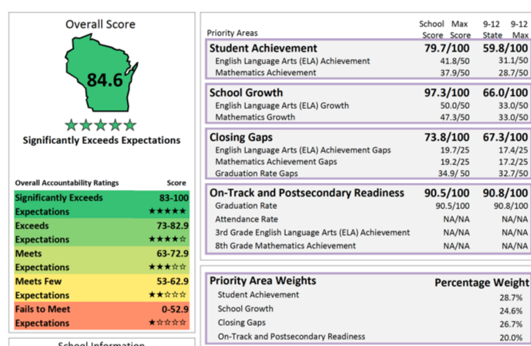
Once I developed a list of high schools identified by local organizations, I contacted two university professors and asked them to identify high schools that provided equitable opportunities for students with disability labels and exhibited high levels of "achievement." I acknowledged that professors may have had a bias that guided me to schools that had been part of their research. To address this bias, I contacted faculty who I understood used a critical lens in their work and had worked closely with schools that provided equitable opportunities for students with disability labels. Additionally, I compared the list of high schools identified by university professors with the list developed through contacting community organizations. My final list of high schools accumulated through snowball sampling included three high schools that were common to both my organization and professor lists and met the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 2.

Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) wrote that typical sampling is used when a researcher is "looking for cases that are unusual—a case of a dramatic failure or success" (p. 38). I

implemented typical sampling because I wanted to gain further insight into a specific type of sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Currently, schools are held accountable based on how well students score on state assessments in the areas of math and reading. The typical method that determined whether a school demonstrated high levels of student "achievement" was through the state report card. I wanted to better understand how a high school had been successful with closing the achievement gap between students with disability labels and students without disability labels. In addition to closing the achievement, I was interested in better understanding the individual supports in place at a school that had performed well with having students on-track for postsecondary success. I used typical sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to identify high schools that had earned a minimum of Exceeds Expectations on the Closing Gaps strand and On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness strands of the state report card. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) (2019) uses state report cards (see Figure 3) as the state's accountability system to report on the performance of every public school on an annual basis.

Figure 3

Sample Wisconsin School Report Card



Overall Score

84.6

★★★★★

Significantly Exceeds Expectations

Overall Accountability Ratings	Score
Significantly Exceeds Expectations	83-100 ★★★★★
Exceeds Expectations	73-82.9 ★★★★☆
Meets Expectations	63-72.9 ★★★☆☆
Meets Few Expectations	53-62.9 ★★☆☆☆
Fails to Meet Expectations	0-52.9 ★☆☆☆☆

School Information

Priority Areas	School Score / Max Score	9-12 State / 9-12 Max
Student Achievement	**79.7/100**	**59.8/100**
English Language Arts (ELA) Achievement	41.8/50	31.1/50
Mathematics Achievement	37.9/50	28.7/50
School Growth	**97.3/100**	**66.0/100**
English Language Arts (ELA) Growth	50.0/50	33.0/50
Mathematics Growth	47.3/50	33.0/50
Closing Gaps	**73.8/100**	**67.3/100**
English Language Arts (ELA) Achievement Gaps	19.7/25	17.4/25
Mathematics Achievement Gaps	19.2/25	17.2/25
Graduation Rate Gaps	34.9/ 50	32.7/50
On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness	**90.5/100**	**90.8/100**
Graduation Rate	90.5/100	90.8/100
Attendance Rate	NA/NA	NA/NA
3rd Grade English Language Arts (ELA) Achievement	NA/NA	NA/NA
8th Grade Mathematics Achievement	NA/NA	NA/NA

Priority Area Weights	Percentage Weight
Student Achievement	28.7%
School Growth	24.6%
Closing Gaps	26.7%
On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness	20.0%

Note. This figure is a sample 2018-2019 school report card for a high school in Wisconsin.

The state report card reports on a school's performance in the following categories:

- Student Achievement

- School Growth
- Closing Gaps
- On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness

The Department of Public Instruction (2019) measured student "achievement" by comparing a school's average composite scores in reading and math from a standardized assessment with state and national averages. Growth was analyzed by comparing average math and reading composite scores from one year to the next. The state assessed whether schools were closing gaps by how much a school lifted lower-performing target group of students compared to comparison student groups (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

State Target Groups Alongside State Comparison Groups

School Target Group	Statewide Comparison Group
American Indian or Alaskan Native	White
Asian	
Black or African American	
Hispanic/Latino	
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	
Two or More Races	
Students with Disabilities	Students without disabilities
English Learners	English proficient
Economically Disadvantaged	Not economically disadvantaged

Note. DPI determined the school target groups based on historically marginalized populations for whom DPI has seen "achievement" and graduation gaps (DPI, 2019).

For example, students with disability labels were compared to students without disability labels. Whether schools had students be on-track to graduate was determined by students hitting specific milestones such as ACT participation, graduation rates, attendance rates, and levels of proficiency in reading and math. In addition to the previous strands, school report cards considered a school's absenteeism (attendance rate below 84%) and dropout rate (graduation rate below 94%).

The overall Closing Gaps score considers four components:

- English Language Arts
- Mathematics
- 4-year graduation rate
- 6-year graduation rate

The Closing Gaps category assessed progress among historically marginalized student groups over time. The state report card used a minimum of 3 consecutive years, and up to 5 consecutive years, of the most recent data for a target group. Schools were given 1.5 points for every student who earned Advanced, 1.0 points for every student who earned Proficient, and 0.5 points for every student who earned Basic. Once all the points were added together, the total points were divided by the number of students resulting in a proficiency rate (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Points-based Proficiency Rate

Performance Level	Points Multiplier	Students		Points
		Count	Percent	
Advanced	1.5	8	5.9%	12
Proficient	1.0	23	16.9%	23
Basic	0.5	39	28.7%	19.5
Below Basic	0.0	66	48.5%	0
Total Tested	-	136	100.0%	54.5

Note. Proficiency rate is based on the English and Math performance levels achieved by students who took the ACT (DPI, 2019).

If a student target group had at least twenty students per year for a minimum of 3 consecutive years, the target group proficiency rate was compared to other groups of students with the same qualifications met. A difference in the rate of change was calculated by subtracting the rate of change for the comparative group from the target group. If the difference in the rate of

change was a positive number, then the gap was decreasing. If the difference in the rate of change was a negative number, then the gap was increasing (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Example Closing Achievement Gaps Table

School Target Group Points-Based Proficiency Rates						State Comparison Group Points-Based Proficiency Rates						Rate of Change		Difference in Rate of Change
Group	2014-15 Points	2015-16 Points	2016-17 Points	2017-18 Points	2018-19 Points	Group	2014-15 Points	2015-16 Points	2016-17 Points	2017-18 Points	2018-19 Points	School Target Group	State Comparison Group	
Example School Target Group	0.351	0.480	0.593	0.452	0.678	Example State Comparison Group	0.793	0.811	0.825	0.843	0.846	0.201	0.050	0.151

Note. WI Dept. of Public Instruction. Office of Educational (2019).

To calculate the academic side of the Closing Gaps score, the product of the Average Difference in Rate of Change and 4.77 was added to 0.72. The sum of this calculation was multiplied by the total points possible (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Closing Achievement Gaps Equation

$$Closing\ Achievement\ Gaps\ Score = [(Average\ Difference\ in\ Rate\ of\ Change * 4.77) + 0.72] * Possible\ Points$$

Note. WI Dept. of Public Instruction. Office of Educational Accountability (2019).

The other half of the Closing Gaps score considered the 4-year and 6-year graduation rates for the target group. The first step to find the graduation rate score was to calculate the difference in the rate of change by subtracting the state comparison group rate of change from the school target group rate of change. Next, the average rate of change was calculated for both 4-year and 6-year graduation rates. Finally, the Closing Graduation Gaps score was determined by multiplying the average 4-year and 6-year Closing Graduation Gap cohort scores by 2.82. The

product of this calculation was added with 0.55 and the sum was multiplied by the total points possible (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Closing Graduation Gaps Equation

$$\textit{Closing Graduation Gaps Score} = [(\textit{Average of } 4-\textit{year and } 6-\textit{year Closing Graduation Gap Cohort Scores} * 2.82) + 0.55] * \textit{Possible Points}$$

Note. WI Dept. of Public Instruction. Office of Educational Accountability (2019).

The final Closing Achievement Gaps score and final Closing Graduation Gaps score were added together to give the school a final Closing Gaps score on its state school report card.

For high schools, the On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness score considered two components (see Figure 9):

- Four-year cohort graduation rate, which was the percentage of students who graduated from high by the end of their fourth year.
- Six-year cohort graduation rate, which was the percentage of students who graduated from high by the end of their sixth year.

Figure 9

Sample School Report Show Graduation Rates

2017-18 Graduation Score: 97.0/100

Group	Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate			Six-Year Cohort Graduation Rate		
	Students in Cohort	Graduates	Rate	Students in Cohort	Graduates	Rate
All Students	516	492	95.3%	487	481	98.8%

Note. WI Dept. of Public Instruction. Office of Educational (2019).

The state report card broke down the graduation rates for each student subgroup (see Figure 10), but the final On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness scores was the average of the four-year cohort graduation rate for all students and the six-year cohort graduation rate for all students.

Figure 10

Sample School Report Show Graduation Rates for All Student Subgroups

On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness Supplemental Data
Group performance is provided for informational purposes only and is not used to determine the On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness scores used in the accountability system.

Group	Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate			Six-Year Cohort Graduation Rate		
	Students in Cohort	Graduates	Rate	Students in Cohort	Graduates	Rate
American Indian or Alaskan Native	<20	*	*	<20	*	*
Asian	31	29	93.5%	28	28	100.0%
Black or African American	25	25	100.0%	28	26	92.9%
Hispanic/Latino	73	71	97.3%	75	73	97.3%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<20	*	*	<20	*	*
White	367	350	95.4%	349	347	99.4%
Two or More Races	<20	*	*	<20	*	*
Students with Disabilities	33	19	57.6%	<20	*	*
Economically Disadvantaged	111	96	86.5%	114	110	96.5%
English Learners	31	30	96.8%	39	38	97.4%

Note. WI Dept. of Public Instruction. Office of Educational (2019).

Site of Study

After a list of schools was accumulated through snowball sampling that met the criteria outlined in Table 2, I cross-referenced the list with the high school list developed through typical sampling that used the state report card criteria. I looked for two schools that were on both the snowball sampling list and the typical sampling for this study. I was unable able to identify two schools that were on both of my sampling lists, so I chose one school that was identified through snowball sampling and one school that was identified through typical sampling for this study. I contacted the principals of these schools to determine their interest in participating in my study. My goal for this study was to investigate a maximum of two schools with at least one of the schools being located in an urban community.

I selected a high school from an urban community to better understand how “achievement” was perceived in this environment. I was interested in learning how “achievement” was perceived in an urban environment because of the unique factors often associated with urban high schools. Urban high schools have an overrepresentation of students

who belong to the marginalized groups outlined on the state report card. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2019) urban high schools have a student enrollment that consists of an overrepresentation of students with disability labels (22.0%), students of color (92.2%), students with limited English proficiency (12.1%), and students who are economically disadvantaged (81.4%) compared to the state average for high school enrollment of students with disability labels (13.1%), students of color (28%), students with limited English proficiency (4.1%), and students who are economically disadvantaged (37.2%).

The Office of Management and Budget (2000) defined a large urban district as a district inside an urbanized area and inside a city with a population of at least 250,000 people and defined a midsize urban district as a district located in a city with a population less than 250,000 but greater than 100,000 people. After a search was completed for school districts that were located within a principal city with a population greater than or equal to 100,000, four school districts were identified. Once the urban districts in Wisconsin were identified, I completed a search of all the public high schools in the urban districts. My search for public high schools in urban school districts resulted in a total of 51schools. After I identified all the public high schools, I excluded schools that did not receive a minimum rating of Exceeds Expectations (73-100) on the Closing the Gaps strand of the school's state report card and the result was six schools. Secondly, I excluded schools that had an Overall Score rating below the Exceeding Expectations rating (< 73) and the result was four schools. I referenced the list of schools I developed through snowball sampling and identified three schools that met both criteria.

South High School. South High School was an urban high school located in southeastern Wisconsin. As of the 2020-2021 school year, the school had a student enrollment of 1,384 students. Of the students enrolled at the school, 159 (11.5%) were identified with a disability

label, 65 (4.7%) students were English learners, and 778 (56.2%) were economically disadvantaged. Of the total enrollment, 764 (55.2%) students were female, 620 (44.8%) students were male. Of the total student enrollment, 717 (51.8%) were Hispanic, 427 (30.9%) were White, 109 (7.9%) were Black, 94 (6.8%) were Asian, 26 (1.9%) were two or more races, and 11 (0.8%) were American Indian. Of the students identified with a disability label, 64 (40.3%) were LD (learning disability), 54 (34.0%) were OHI (other health impairment), 13 (8.2%) were EBD (emotional behavior disability), 13 (8.2%) were A (autism), eight (5.0%) were ID (intellectual disability), five (3.1%) were SL (speech/language), one (0.6%) was H (Hearing Impaired), and one (0.6%) was OI (Orthopedic Impairment).

As of the 2020-2021 school year, South High School employed 118 staff members. Of the total staff, 22 (18.6%) staff members comprised the special education department. There was one special education program supervisor, one transition coordinator, one speech language pathologist, nine paraprofessionals, and 10 special education teachers. In addition to the special education department, there were four school counselors, one college and career center planning assistant, one instructional coach, one parent coordinator, one school psychologist, and two school social workers. The administrative staff consisted of one principal and four assistant principals.

South High School was a full International Baccalaureate (IB) school. Since South was a full IB high school, there were limited options for students to enroll in a class that did not follow the IB curriculum. All students were enrolled in IB classes except for students with an intellectual disability label. Students with this disability label were scheduled into a self-contained learning environment that used a separate curriculum called Unique Learning System. All other students were enrolled full-time in the IB program regardless of student label. Students

with a disability label may have been scheduled into either a Reading or Math Intervention course; however, these two courses replaced a study hall and was in addition to the standard IB courses.

Northeast High School. Northeast High School was a suburban high school located in southeastern Wisconsin. As of the 2020-2021 school year, the school had a student enrollment of 1,087 students. Of the students enrolled at the school, 121 (11.1%) were identified with a disability label, 10 (0.9%) students were English learners, and 220 (20.2%) were economically disadvantaged. Of the total enrollment, 539 (49.6%) students were female, 548 (50.4%) students were male. Of the total student enrollment, 636 (58.5%) were White, 225 (20.7%) were Black, 89 (8.2%) were Hispanic, 78 (7.2%) were two or more races, 52 (4.8%) were Asian, 5 (0.5%) were Pacific Isle, and 2 (0.2%) were American Indian. Of the students identified with a disability label, 38 (31.4%) were OHI, 33 (27.3%) were LD, 21 (17.4%) were A, 14 (11.6%) were ID, 10 (8.3%) were EBD, three (2.5%) were SL, and two (1.7%) were V (Visual Impairment).

As of the 2020-2021 school year, Northeast High School employed 152 staff members. Of the total staff, 25 (16.4%) staff members comprised the special education department. There was one director of student services, one math interventionist/transition Support, two speech and language teachers, nine paraprofessionals, and 12 special education teachers. In addition to the special education department, there were four school counselors, one social worker, one school psychologist, and one English language learning teacher. The administrative staff at Northeast High School included one superintendent, one principal, one associate principal, four directors, and six interventionists/specialists.

Selection of Participants

I reached out to the principals of the schools that met my criteria and identified eight school members that regularly attended data meetings focused on students with disability labels. After the principals identified the individuals who regularly met to discuss data focused on students with disability labels, I implemented snowball sampling to identify additional individuals who provided essential information for this study. I contacted the identified individuals and asked them to share the names of any other individuals within the school or community who played a role in the "achievement" of students with disability labels. After contacting the identified school members, I included three more individuals to be a part of this study. I had each participant complete a brief questionnaire (see Appendix A) to gain insight into their role at the school, how long they had been in their current position, and other general information.

Study Participants

After the two high schools were selected for this study based on the selection criteria, I reached out to the principal of each school to help with the recruitment of participants. After receiving a list of participants from each principal, I provided a summary of the study and written consent to each participant. During my initial interviews and observations, participants suggested additional individuals that were able to provide valuable information to this study. I used the current participants to continue to recruit individuals who were able to provide insight towards answering my research questions.

South High School. I interviewed five participants from South High School for this study. Lidia was a Special Education Coordinator who divided her time between three different high schools. She had been a Special Education Coordinator for six years. Prior to her current

role, she spent 13 years in education and seven years working in a residential treatment center. Anna was a Special Education teacher with 22 years of experience with seven years being at South High School. Claire was a Special Education teacher who had four years of teaching experience with two years at South High School. Kora was a Transition Coordinator with 13 years of experience and had been working at South High School for one year. Mandi was a Special Education teacher with two years of experience and South High School was the only school she had been employed.

Northeast High School. I interviewed six participants from Northeast High School for this study. Mitchell was a School Counselor with 21 years of experience and all his experience had been at Northeast High School. Marybeth was a School Social Worker with six years of experience. Marybeth worked at a prior school for her first six months and then had been at Northeast High School since. Matthew was a Literacy Instructional Coach who had worked in the field of education for 30 years. He began his education career as an English teacher for seven years and then worked as an Instructional Coach for 13 years prior to coming to Northeast High School. Katie was a Math Instructional Coach and had worked in the field of education for 19 years. She had worked at Northeast High School for eight years and had worked as a Special Education teacher prior to her current position. James was an Associate Principal and had worked in education for 18 years including four years at Northeast High School. Prior to working at Northeast High School, James held several positions including Social Studies teacher, Special Education teacher, Teacher Leader of two charter schools, Executive Director of a Montessori Association, Technology Coach, and Library Co-Director. Jessica was a Social Studies teacher and Equity and Engagement Support Teacher who had worked in education for seven years including five years at Northeast High School.

Context of Instructional Delivery During COVID-19

Both high schools shifted from their standard schedule and delivery of instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students at South High School attended school virtually for the entire school year except for 12th grade students who attended in-person for the last month of the school year. Students at Northeast High School attended school virtually for the first semester of the school year. During the second semester, 52% of students attended school in-person four days per week, while 48% of students attended school virtually 100% of the time. All students had a weekly "check-in" day on Wednesdays, which was conducted virtually and consisted of checking in with Enrichment Block teachers and counselors so students could receive additional support or enrichment activities with teachers.

Data Collection

Data collected for this study was gathered through a series of observations of staff meetings, debriefings, field notes, audio recordings, and interviews of school leaders and educators prior to observations and again after observations. I continued data collection until I reached a point that added information no longer provided additional insight (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection was spread out over a period of six months. I collected data over this period because the length provided me enough opportunities to collect meaningful data and allowed me to observe whether strategies discussed during meetings were implemented.

I conducted virtual interviews using Zoom in a private, locked classroom at the school I was employed. I ensured that the participants were not overheard by students or other staff. In addition to holding my interviews in a private classroom, I used pseudonyms for my participants in this study. During my interviews, I kept field notes to obtain information on the environment and nonverbal communication by the participants. All my interviews were recorded on a

personal recording device and transcribed for analysis. I transcribed my interviews and then I listened to the recorded interviews to check the accuracy of the interview transcripts. The transcripts for this study were secured in a locked file cabinet at my place of residence. Audio-recordings were stored on a password-protected computer and on a flash drive that was also stored in a locked file cabinet at my place of residence. I interviewed six participants at Northeast for a total of seven hours and eight minutes. I conducted a series of eight data planning meetings at Northeast for a total of six hours and 40 minutes. I interviewed five participants at South for a total of four hours and 12 minutes. I observed two department meetings for a total of 90 minutes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 11 participants prior to my observations. I conducted these interviews within the first month of the school year to gain an understanding of the initial systems in place and to seek insight into the role of each member prior to when they began to hold meetings. After I reached the point of saturation with my observations of data meetings, I conducted a series of six semi-structured follow-up interviews with the same individuals I interviewed initially. I used my observations to develop a second round of interviews to ask follow-up questions based on events that I saw during my observations. For example, when the participants did not discuss the referral process for special education during the meeting I observed, I asked about the referral process during my follow-up interviews. Additionally, when specific pieces of data were discussed during the meetings I observed, I asked why this data was used to measure “achievement” compared to other forms of data.

I sought permission from my participants to audio-record our interviews, so I was able to transcribe the interviews later. I asked clarification questions with my participants to ensure internal validity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) proclaimed that internal validity deals with making sure that the researcher is collecting data on items that are occurring in reality and not misinterpreting the information. By asking clarification questions, I sought to document the intended responses from my participants.

Interview Protocol

I used the same interview protocol (see Appendix B) for each of the school leaders and educators that I interviewed. Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) discussed the importance of building rapport with my participants. In order to have my participants feel more comfortable with sharing information, I conducted my interviews through their virtual format of choice. Additionally, I opened my interview protocol by developing rapport with my participants. I asked the questions listed in my interview protocol as an outline depending on the responses I received from my participants. Depending on the participant's response, I asked for clarification or a follow-up question. Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) identified probes such as "can you tell me more about that" (p. 48) and "if I might summarize…did I understand that properly" (p. 48) can be used to gain additional information or to check that the participant's response is being interpreted correctly.

Observation Protocol

After the site of my study was selected based on the criteria outlined previously, I contacted the building principal to help me identify the school leaders and educators responsible for the decisions regarding the implementation of individual supports for students with disability labels. I worked with the identified school leaders and educators to determine the appropriate

venue to make my observations. The appropriate venue was dictated by when school personnel had formal discussions regarding the individual supports for students with disability labels (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the environment was chosen for the observation, I used an observation protocol (see Appendix D) to record the participants, physical setting, specific activity, time, date, and my own reactions to what was being observed. Additionally, I noted initial interpretations, ideas, insights, and any confusion I developed. The observation protocol included a list of items to consider during my observations to guide my data collection to ensure that I recorded information that helped me answer my research questions. To ensure that I captured the full dialogue of the staff meeting while I was taking fieldnotes, I audiotaped the meetings. I conducted a follow-up interview with the participants to develop rapport and checked for clarity and addressed any questions that developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, I conducted a series of eight observations of data meetings focused on the "achievement" of students with disability labels. Each observation ranged in length from forty to sixty minutes. I conducted my observations throughout the first six months of the school year to understand the system in place to monitor how school leaders and educators evaluated whether the current individual student supports available were benefiting students with disability labels. My first observation took place after my initial interviews during the first month of the school year to gain insight into the current supports that were utilized to assist students with disability labels. My next observation took place between the second and third month of this study, so I could develop insight on how school leaders and educators monitored whether the current system was effective or needed to be altered. My final observations took place between the fifth and sixth month of the school year to learn about how the school leaders and educators evaluated a

semester's worth of data and how they decided to implement individual student supports during the next semester of school.

I began each observation by noting the physical environment of the location of the meeting. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that the observer should take note of the layout of the room, what objects are placed in the room, and the intended purpose of the room. In addition to noting the physical environment, I took note of the participants I was observing, along with their role within the school and meeting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to the start of the data meeting, I sought permission to audio-record the meeting in case I missed information while I wrote my observation notes. During the observation, I took note of the content of conversations along with staff interactions, the norms that structured the meeting, nonverbal communication amongst the participants, and other factors that my recordings did not identify such as visuals, diagrams, or charts (Glesne, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Field Notes and Reflection

In addition to using publicly available information about the school, interview data, and observation notes, I also journaled and recorded field notes. Saldaña (2009) stressed the importance of recording field notes immediately following an observation to obtain accurate reflections and questions that I had based on what I saw or heard. Immediately following my interviews and observations, I recorded my reflections and potential questions in a secure and confidential location. I recorded field notes on the internal environment of the virtual meeting. I took note of items on the walls, items referenced, and the general culture of the school environment to develop context for my observation site.

My recorded field notes and reflections were transcribed each evening following my data collection. I took note of the questions I had for my participants along with any data that required

further clarification. I followed up with my participants to address my reflections to make sure I captured the correct interpretation of what my participants were trying to communicate. I also reviewed my follow-up questions to gain deeper insight into the research questions being addressed. All my audio recordings and transcriptions were stored in a secure and confidential location.

Data Analysis

I used the line-by-line approach to coding for my transcripts and observation notes outlined in Glesne (2016). I read my raw field notes line by line and created short descriptive terms to identify the themes that occurred during my observations and interviews. After I initially coded each line of my raw notes, I reevaluated my research questions to make sure that I coded data that helped me answer my questions. During my initial coding, I was open to anything that might arise during my observation and interview transcripts. When I began to work on the second process coding, I searched for specific themes related to serving students with disability labels.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described Category Construction as a step-by-step process to analyze qualitative data. First, the interview transcript or field notes were read while incorporating open coding to assign general themes. Second, after open coding for the entire document was completed, a process of analytical coding was completed to begin grouping previous codes into broader themes or categories. During my final coding, I specifically created codes that addressed the elements of my research questions.

I completed my second coding process by re-coding my data to more clearly specify the information interpreted from my interview transcripts and observations from the data meetings. Saldana (2009) stated that second coding is a method to reclassify prior codes into more

appropriate categories. The second coding process was meant to narrow down the number of codes selected for a piece of data and reorganized the data into fewer and broader categories (Saldana, 2009). I narrowed my first coding terms into broader categories centered on the actions of the school staff and the content discussed during the meetings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that terms can be combined during the second coding process; therefore, I combined similar themes into a singular category.

The code labels were drawn from the literature, a descriptor of the information, or was a direct quote spoken by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During my interviews with the school staff who worked closely with students with disability labels, I used codes that were directly spoken by my participants. "Equity PD" and "Support Teams" are examples of codes that I used to better understand the supports in place at the school that assisted students with disability labels.

After I completed my first round of coding, I reviewed my codes to initiate the process of category construction. This process of category construction provided me with the opportunity to reflect on the data, and it led me to additional questions. During my process of data analysis, I emailed several participants to obtain clarification on some of their responses. Additionally, I reached out to my participants to ask more clarifying questions that developed after reviewing the data. After obtaining additional information from my participants, I went back to complete line-by-line coding of the new data. I categorized the codes based on similarities of the themes. Finally, I reviewed my research questions to make sure my categories aligned with the elements of my questions.

Summary

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the processes school leaders and educators implemented to support students with "achievement" and continually evaluate the equitable access students with disability labels had to opportunities. Additionally, this study examined how school leaders and educators perceived student "achievement." In this chapter, I started by outlining the theoretical framework that was used for this study. Next, I identified my rationale for my methodology and outlined the research questions I sought to answer through this study. After presenting my research questions, I provided my positionality and outlined the criteria I used to maintain trustworthiness throughout this study. Following my discussion on trustworthiness, I explained the site of this study along with the participants I interviewed and observed. Finally, I discussed the procedures used to collect and analyze the data obtained.

Chapter IV: Findings

The focus of this study was to investigate the factors school leaders and educators consider when developing and analyzing the individualized support in place at their school for students with disability labels. Furthermore, this study examined the support in place to help school personnel become more equitable educators. A series of interviews and observations of student support and department meetings were observed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders and educators at schools selected for this study perceive “achievement”?
2. What do school leaders and educators view as challenges to student “achievement”?
3. How do school leaders and educators enable and create continuous equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels?
4. How are school leaders and educators supported in this work?

In this chapter I will discuss the findings collected from each school that was explored. First, I will reiterate how each school was selected for this study to develop a contextual understanding of my findings. Next, I will present the major themes of my findings. Finally, I will discuss how the findings relate to the research questions.

Service Delivery Models and Revisiting Site Locations

This study included two high schools in southeastern Wisconsin during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, my observations and interviews were conducted in a virtual format through Zoom and Google Meets. Northeast High School was selected by community organizations as a high school that exhibits high levels of “achievement” for students with disability labels. South

High School was selected based on the statewide report card scoring Significantly Exceeds Expectations for the Closing Gaps strand of the state report card. More specifically, the state report card showed the "achievement" gap narrowing between students with and without disability labels and between White and non-White students.

Before discussing the themes, I will present some historical context regarding service delivery models at each school. Northeast adopted the ICS model in 2013 under Amelia, the current Director of Student Services. A principle of the ICS model is ensuring classes consist of natural proportions. This means that every class reflects the demographics of the school. For example, 11.1% of the student enrollment at Northeast High School consists of students with a disability label. Therefore, 11.1% of the students in each class should have a disability label.

To achieve natural proportions, Amelia worked to eliminate student tracking. Prior to her hiring, core classes had between 4-6 tracked levels resulting in the segregated placement of students determined by academic outcomes. The shift toward having students with disability labels in general education classrooms in proportion to their percentage in the overall population requires that teachers have the capacity to work with all students; and/or that supports are available to assist them in developing that capacity.

At South, school personnel implemented a co-teaching service delivery model. Each special education teacher was assigned to co-teach either a math class or an English class. Initially, school members did not intentionally work to have classes reflect natural proportions when serving students with disability labels in the general education environment.
Over time, however, educators at South provided feedback to administration that co-taught classes were starting to have an overrepresentation of students with disability labels compared to classes that were not co-taught. As a result of this feedback, the administrative team worked to

implement a practice of having the co-taught English and math classes reflect the demographics of the school. In the following section I will present the themes that emerged from my findings.

Presentation of Themes

During the analysis of the data three themes emerged. These themes are: 1) foundational beliefs and understandings; 2) developing processes and supports; and 3) equitable access to education. Both schools in this study demonstrated elements of the themes listed above; however, they often appeared differently depending on the school.

Foundational Beliefs and Understandings

Participants shared the following perspectives, which are important foundational beliefs to support students with disability labels throughout the school. These are: 1) all students are the responsibility of all teachers; 2) all students can achieve; and 3) the importance of building relationships with students and their families. The following sections will elaborate on how these foundational beliefs were expressed at each school.

Belief in the Idea that All Students are the Responsibility of All Teachers. Participants mentioned the importance of having educators who share a belief that everyone at the school is responsible for the "achievement" of every student. For example, Matthew, an Instructional Coach at Northeast, had a general belief that staff currently accepted all students regardless of student label. He stated, "I think that [teachers] do a very good job of being very accepting of all students." Matthew explained that teachers at Northeast foster a learning environment that values the contributions of all students.

Regarding general and special educators, Marybeth, the School Social Worker at Northeast, said, "They're a team and they're serving all students…. All staff have gone through a

universally designed learning [PD]... Basically learning different strategies for differentiating [lessons] for different learners." She explained that the success of students with disability labels is the responsibility of all teachers and not just that of the special education teachers.

Like Marybeth, Katie, a Math Interventionist at Northeast, explained that faculty work together to support all students:

> We support all students. It doesn't matter if they have an IEP… we don't silo our kids, we don't say 'Oh that student has an IEP, they can only work with a special education teacher.' We'll meet with anybody.

Katie noted, "my colleagues are really good, and they work with their teams to meet the learning needs of all students, not just students with IEPs." Katie explained that Northeast implements a co-plan to co-serve model to support students. A co-plan to co-serve model has grade-level teams consisting of school members with varying areas of expertise collaborate to differentiate curriculum. She communicated that a principle of this model is that all staff work together and are responsible for the "achievement" of all students. Katie related that as a member of the "...Student Solutions Team [SST], we discuss students with and without IEPs, with and without 504 plans who are struggling in some way." She noted that this culture of being responsible for all students extended to the school-wide support teams.

James, an Associate Principal at Northeast, emphasized that school personnel have a belief that they are responsible for all the students: "One of our mantras is that special education students are regular education students first." James reiterated that general educators are responsible for the "achievement" of students with disability labels. He explained that special

education services are not a replacement for the teaching practices expected of the general education teachers.

Jessica, a Social Studies teacher, expressed, “We're definitely inclusive in the classroom and have [students with disability labels] involved in everything that we do.” Jessica noted that she is responsible for all the students in her classroom regardless of student label. Regarding students with disability labels, Jessica explained that general education teachers share a belief “to provide as great of an educational experience as possible, like you do for every other kid.” She reiterated that teachers are responsible for providing a strong educational experience for all students.

Similar to Northeast, Claire, a Special Education teacher at South, disclosed there was a culture of teachers having a belief in being responsible for the learning of all students. When describing the teachers at South, she stated, “I would say that we as a staff really promote acceptance.” Claire elaborated that the general education teachers share a belief that they are responsible for the learning of all the students in their class. She explained that general education teachers work to support students with disability labels by “incorporat[ing]…supplementary aids and services into their curriculum… And then if they are really struggling with a student…reach out to the case manager, ask them for advice.”

Anna, a Special Education teacher at South, reiterated that teachers work together to assist students with disability labels with their learning. She disclosed that it is a team effort to help students with disability labels be successful in the general education environment. When a student is struggling in a class, Anna explained that it is a team approach “working together as a group with me, the regular ed teacher, and the student to figure out how are we going to solve the problem.” She emphasized that the general education teacher shares a belief that they are

responsible for the student's learning and is actively engaged in the development of a plan to help the student achieve.

Kora shared that it was her first year working as the Transition Coordinator at South High School. She explained that she had worked for other high schools in the district but noted that students appeared to be more successful at South. When Kora attempted to identify what was different at South, she explained that the faculty collectively take ownership of the learning of all students. She stated, "it's the guidance [department] here, of course, the administration, too. They're super involved. For example…you see them helping in the ACP classrooms… they're visible, and the students know that they're there for support." Kora related that the responsibility to facilitate student success is a team effort. The student services department and administration work with teachers to ensure students are receiving the appropriate support to be successful.

Lidia, the Student Services Coordinator at South, related a similar belief that a culture exists that all faculty are responsible for the "achievement" of all students. She stated, "I think there's an overall culture of a responsibility to meet the needs of all students." Lidia shared that the culture of responsibility extended to the administrative team. She explained the administrative team has an Associate Principal assigned to each grade level and "they take a personal responsibility for the students at their grade level. That I would say is pretty unique to [South]... I think something that makes [South] as successful as it is." Lidia elaborated that she works as a Transition Coordinator at other high schools in the district and having administrators who share a belief in being responsible for all students is most prevalent at South High School.

Participants at both high school communicated that there is a culture of shared responsibility for all students. School personnel at both South and Northeast communicated that the general education and special education teachers share a belief that they are responsible for the learning of all students. Furthermore, they shared that the general education and special education teachers work together to ensure all students are receiving the necessary support to be successful.

Belief that All Students can Achieve. Participants at both schools shared the perspective that that all students can achieve. Additionally, many school members related that student "achievement" involved more than academic outcomes. The participants described the following: 1) personal perspectives of "achievement"; 2) an institutional viewpoint of "achievement"; and 3) the tensions that exist regarding personal and institutional perspectives of "achievement." The personal perspectives of "achievement" and the institutional viewpoint of "achievement" are my designations that were identified from the varying ways participants defined "achievement."

Personal Perspectives of "achievement." Jessica, a Social Studies teacher at Northeast, stated that students are successful when they "stay on top of [their] workload, communicat[e] with the teachers...reach out to utilize many different resources...[and] utiliz[e] those...to assist them in organization." Jessica shared that her personal perspective of "achievement" involved students developing their skills to identify the necessary resources to assist them with their learning.

Like Jessica, Katie, a Math Interventionist at Northeast, reiterated that a successful student has the "knowledge of the resources available at [Northeast] and accesses those resources when they need them." She further noted that a student is successful when they have "learned

how to organize their time to manage all the tasks they need to do." Jessica and Katie seemed to acknowledge that soft skills are needed in service of completing schoolwork.

Marybeth, a School Social Worker at Northeast, explained that a student demonstrates "achievement" when they develop the skills necessary to live safely in their community after high school. She explained that achievement "would be like having the skills to be responsible, to be respectful, to be safe in the community, to go out and interview for a job, to go out and go to college, and have social success." Marybeth elaborated on the specific skills a student would need to develop by the end of high school to demonstrate "achievement":

> Knowing how to file your taxes, knowing how to go to the grocery store and shop, knowing how to apply for jobs, knowing what to wear and how to behave at a job interview, knowing how to walk into a room where you know no one and making friends.

She emphasized that there was more to define student "achievement" besides a student obtaining a high G.P.A. She explained, "I don't really look at like, 'If you get a 4.0 [G.P.A.], that's high achievement.' High achievement is functioning in society."

Matthew, an Instructional Coach at Northeast, stressed that "achievement" is reached when a student develops the necessary skills that will support them in accomplishing their goals. He shared, "a successful student is one that is enabled to do whatever it is they want to do with their life." For example, Matthew explained, "if you wanna be a cook, a line cook, you learn some social skills, some organizational skills, some inventorying skills." He stressed that students developing the skills that align with their goals is a mark of "achievement."

Mitchell, a School Counselor, expressed that student success was determined by how hard they work. When explaining what makes a student successful, he related, "how much they

know or how "smart" they are really doesn't determine how successful a student is. It's really that work ethic. Do they seek out help for themselves?" Mitchell further communicated a few examples of what makes a student successful. He noted that they are "staying on top of assignments… advocating for themselves… If they know they're struggling, and they know where to reach out."

Like the participants at Northeast, Mandi, a Special Education teacher at South, mentioned that all students can be successful. She explained that "students that have a good sense of what their goals are, both during high school and after high school are successful." Mandi emphasized that "achievement" may look different from one student to another depending on the goals of the students. She noted that a student is successful when they are "making a post-high school plan and…moving towards that goal." She explained that "achievement" for a student may vary based on their goals.

Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator, shared that an important trait of a student who achieves is knowing their strengths and being able to understand when they need to seek out assistance. She related, "a successful student is one who can recognize their strengths, and recognize the supports they need to be successful, and advocate for those supports." Lidia noted that communication was an important characteristic of successful students. Students need to understand when they need to self-advocate and communicate those needs.

Claire, a Special Education Teacher, described a successful student as "a student who works hard, regardless of what their grades are. Someone who works hard, someone who is dedicated to their studies, [and is] reaching out to their teachers." Claire further sated "[if a student is] involved in extracurriculars… or if they have a very busy home life, being very active in helping with their younger siblings [that those could be viewed as achievement]." She

explained that “achievement” can include a student who is able to manage multiple responsibilities.

Claire explained that “my idea of success is, "Okay, you're trying your best, you're working hard, and you gave it 100%", and I applaud my students who I know who are doing that, even if their grades are Cs or Ds.” Claire shared that she values her students’ effort and willingness to ask for help when needed.

Participants at both schools shared their personal definitions of success and “achievement” involved characteristics such as developing plans to meet personal goals, self-advocating, managing responsibilities, communicating with teachers, organizing their workload, identify resources, life skills, and students understanding their own strengths. School members acknowledged that the previously listed skills assist students with their schoolwork; however, they placed less emphasis on academic outcomes when defining “achievement.” Additionally, the participants communicated that “achievement” varied among students.

Institutional Viewpoint of “achievement.” Unlike the personal perspectives of student “achievement”, the participants shared that the institutional viewpoint of “achievement” had a more academic focus. For example, Kora, the Transition Coordinator at South, stated, “It's always been the academics, it's always academics, always academics.” Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator, explained that since South is a full IB school, it identifies students who achieve as ones who meet the IB standards. She mentioned, “a successful student at [South] demonstrates all of these IB learning profile characteristics.” She clarified that the IB learning profile is aimed at developing students who are “inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective.”

Anna, a Special Education teacher, reiterated that South views “achievement” through the lens of meeting the IB standards. Anna explained “the IB philosophy is very integrated, and you have to produce something on demand, that is good enough. So, it's not just a multiple-choice kind of test.” Since the IB curriculum requires students to produce outcomes on demand, Anna stated that students “need to be driven, and then those are the kids that are successful.”

During the special education department meeting, the teachers’ conversations focused on the academic performance of students. Their conversations involved the academic performance of students and discussed how to get students with disability labels to pass the IB classes and prepare them for the IB tests. Anna stated students may “...take four, five, six, seven IB tests. Some take one, two. Some don't take any.” However, during the special education department meeting, teachers discussed that it was preferred that all students work towards having the ability to perform well on the assessments.

Similar to the way the IB learning profile characteristics are emphasized at South, school members at Northeast shared that recently there has been an emphasis on students developing character traits. For example, administrators encourage teachers to use the acronym P.R.I.C.E. to instruct students on the following five traits: Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Courage, and Empathy. When describing how teachers incorporate P.R.I.C.E. into their curriculum, Marybeth, a School Social Worker, explained:

> We are focused on teachers putting these [character traits] into their classrooms through their curriculum. So, for example, if you're reading a book really pointing out this character is really demonstrating perseverance. By the way, they did X, Y, Z, I can tell that they're persevering... [Also] if you have a presentation, saying, ‘Today, you guys are

really gonna [*sic*] have to demonstrate courage when you come up here and do that, and I commend you for that.'

Marybeth shared that the teachers take an active role incorporating these five characteristics in their curriculum. She explained that teachers incorporate the traits into their curriculum through modeling and classroom activities.

Like Marybeth, Matthew stated, "we've been really focusing a lot lately on…develop[ing] this thing called P.R.I.C.E… It's about getting kids to become good people, good citizens." He shared that their goal was to help students become successful with their goals once they have graduated from Northeast. Katie added that students "learn about [Northeast's] character program, which is P.R.I.C.E." in their freshman advisory class. She noted that P.R.I.C.E. helps to teach students how to be respectful and persevere when circumstances become challenging.

In addition to developing the P.R.I.C.E. character traits, James, an Associate Principal, stated, "from the school perspective, I would say [achievement] is hitting some key measurable pieces of data... having kids graduate is super important, having kids have a post-secondary plan is super important... If you're going to college, ACT is important." He further noted that "[Northeast], historically…has leaned towards very traditional academics as measures of success." Although school personnel are working towards emphasizing the P.R.I.C.E. character traits, the practice of defining student "achievement" through academic outcomes still occurs at Northeast. In response to a question asking what is currently used to measure student achievement, Jessica responded, "grades are... And that's just historically where we've been at [Northeast]." Jessica reiterated that student "achievement" is still determined by the level of academic success that a student has in their classes.

Matthew explained that "[Northeast] traditionally has been only focused on the academics or primarily…focused on the academics. That's still ingrained in the community, that's still ingrained in terms of the so-called culture of some of the staff and the students." He communicated that although there has been progress to shift away from having academics as the sole defining characteristic of "achievement" more work needs to be done. Matthew noted that the shift to include characteristics besides academics to define "achievement" has been a slow process.

Katie, an Instructional Coach, stated, "students are more than grades, they're more than their test scores." However, in response to a question asking her to identify how success is measured, she stated, "Unfortunately, we do use a lot of grades [for monitoring success]. We don't do standards-based grading." In this quote, it appeared that the institutional definition of "achievement" takes on a prominent role in measuring the progress of students. Additionally, it appeared that there was a greater emphasis on academic outcomes rather than the learning process along the way.

During the SST meetings, the participants discussed that the referral process to provide students with additional support was determined by their academic performance in their classes. Teachers identified when a student required additional support by whether or not the student was receiving a class grade of a D or an F. Furthermore, team discussions focused on academic performance and developing strategies to improve a student's grade to a passing mark.

Participants at each high school communicated a culture of "achievement" that I called an institutional viewpoint of "achievement." This definition of "achievement" favored academic performance. Additionally, when school members described student success or "achievement", there were times they defaulted to their school's specific standards. For example,

participants at South defined a successful student as one that demonstrated the IB learning profile characteristics. School members expressed there is an attempt to incorporate character traits into the institutional definition of “achievement”; however, the transition has been slow.

Tensions Between Institutional and Personal Definitions. Participants explained that the institutional definition of “achievement” did not always align with their personal definitions of “achievement.” For example, Mitchell, a School Counselor at Northeast, explained:

> We have so many kids that wanna get to [the flagship college in the state], so [they think] ‘I'm gonna take AP Bio.’ Well, you don't even like science, why are you doing that [if the class does not align with your goals]?... But our school doesn't do a great, great job at [assisting students with aligning their course selection with their interests and goals] because it's so hyper-focused on college.

Mitchell communicated some of the tension educators had regarding student “achievement.” For example, he stated, “[If] you mention [technical college] at [Northeast] ... it was like... you cattle prodded their mom.” Like Matthew’s previous comments, Mitchell shared that transitioning away from a viewpoint that a student will only be successful if they attend a prestigious university is challenging because academics are so ingrained within the community.

During an SST meeting, Olivia, a School Counselor, shared, “[A student] wanted to take all AP classes… We thought it would be better if he dropped a class and took a guided study hall, but he didn’t want to do that.” Olivia expressed concern that students were becoming stressed and frustrated because they enrolled in multiple AP classes. Ron, the team facilitator, stated, “[A student] was becoming anxious and depressed… because of expectations in [his multiple] AP classes.” Team members communicated that students were enrolling in multiple AP

classes without being interested in those subjects because of the student's belief that enrolling in those classes equates to "achievement" and success.

At times, some participants struggled with defining student "achievement." For example, Mitchell struggled to balance the institutional definition of "achievement" with his own beliefs regarding what it means for students to achieve:

> We have these ACT scores, and now we're realizing that it took one pandemic for them to basically say, ACT scores don't mean a thing, and so drop them. We kept chasing this ACT score…Why are we doing that?...We have kids that are wildly successful that leave our place that don't take AP.

Mitchell questioned the parameters that Northeast used to define "achievement." He identified that the current metric of the ACT was not an accurate measurement because there have been students to graduate from Northeast who became successful and did not score high on the ACT test.

Mandi, a Special Education teacher at South, communicated that her perspective of "achievement" was different from the high school's viewpoint of student "achievement." When explaining how "achievement" is measured at South, she shared it is "measured by test scores of a student…mastering standards on…the ACT." Mandi explained that her beliefs on "achievement" focused more on the growth of a student. As a Special Education teacher, she shared that she also defined "achievement" as a student meeting their IEP goals. When providing examples of "achievement", Mandi shared, "it could be achievement of IEP goals… growth in attendance, a growth in completed assignments, [and] a growth in writing ability." She further explained that student growth "should be celebrated more" as an "achievement."

Lidia noted that South being a full IB school has caused some tensions to exist. She shared that when "a teacher struggles, I can completely understand, they're trying to hold themselves accountable to IB standards as a teacher and then also meet the needs of the kid, and there is a conflict there sometimes." She elaborated that there are times when teachers become hyper focused on making sure students demonstrate proficiency on the IB standards that they may overlook other forms of "achievement."

The participants expressed that there was a belief that all students can develop the skills to be successful. However, the forms of student "achievement" tended to vary depending on whether it was an individual's belief or the general perspective of the high school. Individual participants shared that "achievement" was determined by the individual goals of the students. Furthermore, many of the participants identified self-advocacy, ability to identify needs, locate resources, organization, and the growth of a student as "achievement."

When participants described the institutional viewpoint of "achievement", they often focused on academic outcomes such as ACT scores or showing proficiency of the IB standards. Additionally, discussions during the SST meetings focused on student grades. Many of the participants expressed the difficulty of attempting to navigate personal viewpoints of "achievement" and that of their school. At the same time, all participants noted that all students can and do achieve. An important factor to better support students with "achievement" was to develop relationships with students and families.

A Belief in the Importance of Building Relationships. In addition to a belief that all students are the responsibility of all school members and that all students can achieve, the third foundational belief shared is a belief in building relationships with students and families. For example, when explaining what helped students be successful at South, Mandi stated, "I think

relationship building is a big piece [for student success].” When a student begins to struggle at South, she reiterated that “relationship-building and encouraging students plays a big role.” She noted that having formed a relationship with a student helps to understand how to address barriers when a student starts to struggle in a class. To better understand how to align a student’s goals with the curriculum, Mandi stated she often will be “sitting down with a student one-on-one and really making an individualized plan of what are your goals, what's important to you, what's important to your family, what do you see being important to you?” She stated that she will often use this information to make the curriculum more relatable to the student.

Developing relationships with students and families is promoted by the administrative team at South High School. For example, Anna said administrators “encourage teachers to call home a lot... So, we have to constantly have notes every time we reach out.” Anna added that when a student continues to have struggles with a class, administrators will review previous parent contact notes prior to setting up a parent meeting to better understand how to support the student.

Kora, the Transition Coordinator at South, disclosed that developing relationships with families begins the summer before students start their freshman year. The summer prior to starting their freshman year, all students attend a summer orientation called Summer Bridges. Kora explained that during this program, teachers are “engaging in getting to know our students and our families.” Kora added that the orientation provides teachers with the opportunity to form relationships with families before day one of the school year. She noted that having relationships formed prior to school starting helps with the success of their students.

Claire, a Special Education teacher at South, provided an example of how she used a pre-existing relationship with a parent to help a student find success. When she encountered a student

who was struggling with work completion, Claire stated, “His mom and I made an arrangement... For the rest of the school year, he's gonna stay after school.” The first day the student stayed after school, Claire noted that she held a conversation with the student to better understand the best method to support him.

> I just told him, ‘What do you need from me?’ And he ended up sharing a lot with me about his insecurities, with having ADHD and insecurities about him failing all of his classes...that was really a breaking point for him and I because I feel like that finally gave him a space where he could articulate exactly what he needed.

Claire reiterated that building a relationship with the student helped her to better understand how to support his learning.

Just as teachers at South communicated the importance for developing relationships with students and families, many participants at Northeast shared a similar position. For example, Jessica identified that teachers building relationships is a vital component to foster student success:

> It always goes back to relationship-building, the way that teachers interact with students. I think we place a lot of emphasis on academic success, which is great, but I feel like we need to really focus on intrinsically the whole student and what they bring to the table as their assets.

Jessica related that there is a need to understand her students beyond the classroom. She seems to believe that there is a need to view her students with an asset-based perspective because the qualities they possess are valuable.

Marybeth reiterated the importance of building relationships to help students find success at Northeast. When relating the key factors to help students receive the necessary support in class, Marybeth stated:

> Relationships are the key to everything... I do think it's important in my role that I have good relationships with not just students and families, but also staff members because then when my advocacy role comes in, I can bridge that good relationship...and they know that I'm gonna say what's best [for the student].

Marybeth explained that the trust built through developing strong relationships can help bridge differences when challenges arise because the stakeholders will understand that she is advocating for what is in the student's best interest.

In addition to the teachers, administrators disclosed a sense of responsibility for building relationships with families. James, an Associate Principal, disclosed that building positive relationships helps to build a stronger learning environment.

> It helps with behavior, it helps with the academics, it helps with everything, that the first contact from the administration is not a negative...I know their student, I've seen their student be successful in class, I've been able to share that with a parent.

James noted it was important to reach out to families early and let them know that he cares about their learning. He emphasized that it was important to communicate about the strengths of the students instead of focusing on student deficits.

Mitchell shared that it was important to build relationships with families to better understand how to support students. For example, he explained that he was meeting with a student who was failing a few of her classes. Through this meeting he learned "her mom works two jobs… She's gotta get [her] brother on to first grade, she's gotta make all the

breakfast, she's gotta do all these things. And our teachers don't 100% understand that." Mitchell explained that if teachers were aware of the commitments that the student has at home, then they may be more willing to provide the student with accommodations.

The participants at South and Northeast expressed that forming relationships with students and families is an important principle to assist students with being successful. They noted that having a formed relationship with a student helps with presenting curriculum in a way that is relatable to the student. Additionally, school members shared that being aware of a student's individual circumstances can assist teachers with helping the student find success in the classroom.

School personnel at South and Northeast shared foundational beliefs that drive the processes in place to help students achieve. Participants explained that there is a belief that every student is the responsibility of every school member. They also shared a belief that that all students can achieve. Finally, school personnel related it is important to develop relationships with students and their families. These foundational beliefs influence the processes put in place to support students with disability labels with "achievement."

Developing Processes and Supports

In addition to a foundational set of beliefs, the second theme identified was having a process to develop supports to improve the learning environment. The participants described the following: 1) support structure for teachers; 2) supports for students in the general education environment; and 3) the process to determine individual supports for students. The next sections will describe these structures at each school.

Support Structure for Teachers. Participants reported that there were structures in place at South and Northeast to support teachers with helping students achieve.

They reported the following structures: 1) supportive administrators; 2) time for collaboration; 3) a positive working environment; and 4) relevant professional development (PD).

Supportive Administrators. Claire, a Special Education teacher at South, shared a recent conversation that she had with her administrator: “I'm like, I'm really anxious about this and she's like, ‘I get it. Let's talk it out.’ And so, she's just really, really supportive.” Claire explained that she felt the administrators at South cared about the teachers and were willing to provide support. She recalled that in her previous school, it was not easy meeting with the administrator, and she was often left on her own to figure out challenges she was having with classroom management:

> I really do appreciate that [administrators ask] … from a general education teacher perspective, what can we improve? What is going well so that we continue doing that? And then they ask the Sped teacher and it's very much a conversation rather than like, "Okay, we're gonna tell you what to do".

Claire expressed that the administrative team includes the special education teachers in the decision-making process. It appeared that the administrative team valued the perspectives of the special education teachers when making school-based decisions.

In addition to administrators making themselves available, Claire noted that they are responsive to faculty questions and actively seek feedback for improvement. For example, Claire stated, “[The administrators] are always willing to answer my questions, no matter how small. They check in and ask for teacher feedback consistently, and I feel like that feedback actually gets implemented." Claire further explained that administrators will take time out of their schedule to assist teachers with brainstorming solutions when they feel unsure of how to support a student with finding success. If an administrator does not have an immediate answer to a

faculty question, Claire stated, "they follow up with you in an appropriate time frame rather than never getting back to you." Claire communicated that the administrators at South view themselves as part of the support network for students. They work with the teachers to develop plans to help students achieve instead of leaving the burden solely on the teachers.

Like Claire, Mandi, a Special Education teacher, expressed the importance of feeling supported by the administrative team. Mandi explained that "admin recognizes when I have additional challenges or responsibilities and works to support me by lessening the load or helping me do the work." She further explained that administrators often will volunteer to call a parent on the teacher's behalf or speak with a student to help them become more successful.
When sharing how administrators help to lessen her workload, Mandi stated, "there's certainly flexibility in the schedule and... the principal will say, 'If you need to take time to do this, you can.' And I've just always felt like I have been able to do that." It appeared that the administrators at South fostered a supportive working environment that allowed school personnel to be able to be successful. It seemed that the school administrators worked to strike a balance of asking school members to provide needed supports to students while maintaining realistic expectations. This may provide faculty with the opportunity to deliver additional assistance to students with fidelity.

Mandi further reported that administrators support teachers by "making sure that the general education teachers and the special education teachers are able to collaborate and have a mutual understanding of what is each other's role." The administrative team works to make sure all teachers understand their responsibilities. This helps so there is not confusion amongst co-teachers regarding classroom responsibilities.

At South High School, Associate Principals oversee students based on grade level. For example, there is one administrator for freshmen, another for sophomores, and so forth. Lidia explained that the Associate Principals feel responsible for getting to know the students in their grade level.

> [Associate Principals] know a lot about the individual student themselves. So, if the student isn't being successful in a classroom, usually that administrator also knows 5 or 10 other things going on with that student that are impacting them… These relationships help when it is needed to develop an improvement to a student's learning environment when they are not finding success.

Administrators support their teachers by taking an active role to gain knowledge of their students. Having a strong understating of student needs, helps them to coach teachers when a student begins to show signs of not being successful.

Like South High School, the administrators at Northeast took an active role supporting teachers to facilitate student success. James spoke about the way he viewed his role for supporting students as an associate principal:

> I think first and foremost, it's being an advocate for the student and making sure that as an organization, as a school, we're doing everything that we possibly can to set up the student to be successful, whether that's adding in resources, or materials, or building capacity in adults.

James emphasized that it was his role to meet the needs of the students rather than focusing on what the students need to change to fit into the current system at Northeast. He emphasized that it was the administrative team's responsibility to ensure that current teaching practices were

meeting the needs of all students. If the practices are not meeting the needs of all students, then the administrative team is responsible for facilitating changes to improve student success.

Administrators took an intentional approach to guide teacher reflection at Northeast High School. For example, a student referral Google form was sent to teachers weekly to identify students with a grade of a D or an F. Marybeth stated that the form asks teachers to write:

> the student's name, mode of instruction, so if they're in-person or remote, then class, [and] the concern. The options for concern are engagement, achievement, social, emotional, equity... And then they just identify their attempted intervention with the student and then their parent contact.

The referral form is then reviewed by administration to make sure appropriate support was utilized within the classroom. If a teacher is identified as having a high number of students not being successful, then the administrator will meet with the teacher. James described the coaching process to help build the teacher's capacity. He explained:

> We might bring in our literacy specialist or our instructional coach and say, 'Okay, so what are some ways that we can scaffold this, or some really intentionally build in some vocabulary lessons, so that we're making sure that all the kids have the knowledge base to access the material?'

James stressed that the goal in these coaching meetings is not to be punitive. He clarified that the goal is to support the teacher to better help students be successful.

Marybeth shared that she felt comfortable seeking input from an administrator if she needed assistance address a situation. "I do think that we have an administration that is approachable, so if you were struggling with something or needed support [administrators are willing to collaborate]." Similar to Marybeth, Katie, and an Instructional Coach, stated that the

administrators "are really supportive. So professionally we are given time. We are also given a voice, a very, very loud voice." Overall, participants at both schools felt their administrative team was incredibly supportive of the teachers and support team.

Staff Collaboration. Teacher collaboration was very structured at Northeast High School. James, an Associate Principal, communicated that co-planning was implemented as part of the school's move to ICS to provide teachers with the resources to co-serve all students. School members with varying areas of expertise collaborated in a professional learning community (PLC) to increase the teaching capacity of one another. James explained the roles of educators when they collaborated during their PLC:

> Its [the] regular education teacher bringing that content knowledge, that instructional approach, and knowing where kids are going to struggle. I think it's a special education teacher, or a student support teacher, or other specialists talking about what strategies, or what tools, or what scaffolds, can be implemented on the front end, so that all students can access and be successful.

James emphasized that every PLC meets weekly at a specified time. Having a specified weekly meeting time ensures that all team members are present to develop curriculum. Furthermore, team members with varying expertise are able to collaborate to identify areas where students may struggle and implement strategies to allow them to access the content.

Jessica shared the importance of the PLC to make sure the necessary support is put in place for students during their freshman year. She noted that the transition period into high school can be challenging for students, so the weekly collaborative meetings help teachers share and implement strategies to help students be successful. Jessica related, "[In] our Professional

Learning Community Model, [teachers] are working as a team and really targeting the freshmen to get them acclimated and successful [at Northeast].” She further highlighted the importance of co-planning as a strategy to build capacity among general educators. Jessica clarified that even if a class does not have a co-teacher, the resources developed by a specialist can still be used in classes that are not co-taught.

Katie further explained the benefit of administrators providing time in the teachers’ schedule to collaborate. Prior to the hiring of Amelia as Director of Student Services, faculty seldom had scheduled time to collaborate with their colleagues. Katie explained the lack of collaboration earlier in her teaching career:

> Eight years ago, when I started at [Northeast], I never left my classroom in the wing of the building where all the special education teachers were. I was self-contained every hour of the day. That doesn't exist anymore. Now the special education teachers are aligned with a content area and co-teach and co-plan to co-serve three out of five periods a day.

During the English PLC, the general education teachers noted the importance of collaborating with a special education teacher on the English curriculum. When the special education teacher provided a perspective on a lesson, the other teachers appeared to value the insight and noted that the input was something they had not considered. Additionally, the special education teacher was able to share instructional materials such as graphic organizers to English teachers that did not have her as a co-teacher.

The participants explained that they are provided with time in their schedules to collaborate with colleagues during the school day. Katie shared that most teachers receive two

planning periods daily to either collaborate with other educators or to work on individual tasks. She stated:

> Every teacher has two prep periods. One is a common planning period with their content team, and one is a personal prep period. So, someone aligned with algebra 2...would go to common planning algebra 2, at least once a week.

Katie shared that she felt fortunate that administration provided teachers with two planning periods. She explained that at a previous district where she worked, she only received one planning period.

In addition to providing educators with time in their schedules to collaborate with colleagues, administration provided the planning teams with resources to guide collaboration. During the English PLC meetings and SST meetings, the participants used an identical agenda template to help guide the educators. The agendas had four columns that included a topic for discussion, the presenter, allotted time, and a description of content and who handled the next steps. Furthermore, each team named group norms along with violations if norms were not followed. For example, the agenda listed the following norms: a) start on time, end on time; b) brevity; c) value the opinions of others, be aware of your assumptions & biases; d) be present and listen; e) come prepared; f) P.R.I.C.E; and g) remain solution focused. During the observed meetings, the participants remained focused on discussing solutions to help students become successful in their classes. The team worked to identify the factors impeding a student's performance of behaviors that indicate success and collaborated to develop solutions.

Like Northeast, school members at South are provided time for collaboration. Anna, a Special Education teacher at South, explained that the administrative team provides teachers with time to collaborate:

> We have a meeting day where there's no kids in the building, but teachers are here... In the morning session of the planning day, there's always administrative-led something. And often times, they will give us time as departments during those. And then if there's not time then, then teachers use the afternoon time, and they'll often get together.

Administrators provide teachers with time to collaborate with their departments; however, it is often left to the teachers to organize and plan how to use the given time. Not having clearly defined objectives may lend itself to team members not addressing specific needs of the students or an inefficient use of the time provided. Additionally, a lack of structured meetings times may present a challenge to having a full team of general and special educators collaborate to improve student success.

When Lidia compared the amount of time South provides teachers for collaboration compared to the other schools where she works, she expressed:

> The teachers at [South]...have more prep time to plan together than I would say is typical for [district] high schools. So, there is built-in time for them to plan, for co-teachers...And there's flexibility to work with each other. The time is there. Utilizing it, it's more up to the teachers.

Like Anna, Lidia related that teachers are provided with time to collaborate with their colleagues. However, the teachers are not provided with a structured agenda, and it is left up to the individual teachers to determine the best way to utilize their given time.

Positive Working Environment. Marybeth, a School Social Worker, stated Northeast High School was a wonderful place to work:

> I've heard this saying before, destination district... This is a district people want to work in, and once you're here, you don't wanna leave... This is a place you would wanna stay

> and retire... I would say it's a great place to work. I have always felt supported, I've always felt heard. I feel like [administrators] take into consideration people's ideas and thoughts.

Marybeth mentioned that she enjoys working at Northeast because she feels educators are provided with the necessary resources to help implement new initiatives. When explaining a commitment to school-wide initiatives, Marybeth reported, “any time there's a new initiative or a new thing that we're taking on, I do think we receive proper professional development... I also think those PLC, Professional Learning Communities, are very helpful.” The administrative team works to set teachers up for success by not rushing into new initiatives and making sure necessary supports are put into place.

An example of receiving support for an initiative occurred when implementing the ICS service delivery model. Amelia, the Director of Student Services, spent a lot of time prior to the school year making sure that classes represented the natural proportion of the school. Katie explained that prior to the start of the school year the Director of Student Services “make[s] sure that our classes have proportional representation. [She] spends weeks in the summer balancing classes... so that no one section is full of students with English language learners, that kind of thing.” Since not every class has a co-teacher, having the natural proportion of students helped ensure that the responsibility to service students did not fall upon only a few teachers. Through this example, Katie emphasized that school members enjoy Northeast because of the commitment made by the administrative team to support teachers.

Similar to Northeast, participants at South shared an enjoyment for working at their school. For example, Kora, the transition coordinator, shared that she worked at another school in the district, and she really enjoyed her time at South High School. She shared that there was a

team approach at South to support students. She communicated, “[F]rom the first day… [administrators] are engaging in getting to know our students and our families, so it's really just a team effort here.” Kora related that having administrators actively engage with students creates a culture of active teamwork and fosters a sense of shared responsibility.

Participants at each school stressed that they enjoyed working at their school and envisioned working there for a long time. They communicated that they felt supported by their administrators and were put in a position to succeed. Furthermore, school members stated that they appreciated that administrators showed a commitment to new initiatives and provided them with relevant resources.at

Professional Development. Jessica communicated that new initiatives occur in two-year cycles at Northeast, and they depend on the current focus area:

> Our PD depends on where our focus is for the year… So, increasing technology in the classroom and utilizing Canvas was a big thing for two years, trying to build our Canvas courses and move our classes online, and make our virtual classrooms interactive.

Jessica further explained that more recent PD has focused on student equity in school. She added, “We've been doing a lot of equity work, we've been doing a lot of PD stuff with the staff. We had a group do a facilitated conversation discussion... that we're gonna use to build our equity plan.” Jessica noted that she appreciated not having a new initiative every school year. She also noted that administrators provided PD that was relevant to the school initiatives.

When explaining the process following the implementation of a new initiative, Marybeth provided “I think that's a work in progress... Any time there's a new initiative... I do think we receive proper professional development, but I think it could be supported a little more as far as follow-up.” Additionally, James mentioned that he believes the current PD is beneficial;

however, he conceded that continued work needs to be done to make sure that PD better serves the needs of the teachers.

> Our next step is we need to make sure that the support is actually what the teachers need and want, and is relevant to their practices, and it's not something from the outside coming in or from the top coming down.

James shared that administration was currently putting together a committee representing some of the stakeholders at Northeast High School to help identify some of the areas that need improvement. For example, James mentioned that their current initiative deals with addressing equity in the classroom. In preparation of developing PD to address equity, James shared the committee is analyzing the current state of equity at Northeast. He shared, “[W]e wanna make sure that we truly understand the problem, but what we're working towards, we're calling a pedagogy of equity, which is a set of instructional methods and strategies that we can use in every classroom.” Including teachers on the committee helps them to have a voice in the determination of content that will be distributed through PD; therefore, helping to increase faculty buy-in.

Unlike Northeast, the participants at South communicated that PD time is provided to help teachers analyze data. For example, Anna shared, “[D]uring our PD days, sometimes [administrators] do give us large chunks of that time to work with our departments and go through all the data. Especially, after the kids take ACT and we get those scores back.” She added that time is used during PD days to analyze IB testing data as well. School members worked to identify students based on academic outcomes during time allocated for PD. This PD time was allocated to examine data that focused on the institutional view of “achievement.”

Claire shared that there are many PD opportunities offered to school members. She communicated that these opportunities are offered at the school and district levels. For example, Claire mentioned, “They create book clubs for teachers to learn from each other, which I really appreciate. And then the district too has some PDs that are helpful.” Claire explained that she participated in a district PD program discussing culturally-relevant pedagogy. She stated that the goal of the program was to learn, “how can we make our curriculum reflect our students in all classes?” Lidia reiterated that “most of professional development is provided from our district.” She added that one of the challenges to implementing information from district PD is that most of the PD is optional and not directly tied to the goals of South High School.

Participants at both schools recognized that PD helped to support their teaching. At Northeast, participants related that the PD intentionally designed to support teachers with new initiatives. The programs provided at Northeast were required of all faculty members. In contrast, participants at South revealed that many PD opportunities were optional; however, the participants related that they were meaningful and helped support their teaching practices.

School members at both high schools identified that support structures were put in place to assist teachers with helping students achieve. Participants communicated that members of the administrative team were supportive and willing to take an active role ensuring students were successful by meeting with students and communicating with families. Administrators fostered a positive working environment and participants shared that they envisioned working at their school for the long term. Finally, school members explained that they appreciated the PD opportunities that were available and that they supported their teaching practices. Both schools developed processes to support teachers in order to help students be successful.

Supporting Students in General Education Environment. In addition to developing a structure to help teachers, each

school implemented strategies that assisted students with "achievement" in the general education environment. The participants shared that the presence of school-wide resources and their service delivery models supported students in the general education environment. The next sections will identify how each school implemented these supports.

School-Wide Supports. School members reported that there were supports in place at their high schools that all students were able to utilize. For example, all incoming freshmen at Northeast are required to enroll in freshman advisory which is structured to help them develop skills to be successful. Katie explained that freshmen advisory is:

> twice a week the first month of school. Then we scale back after that. The students learn about time management, about stress management, [and] mindfulness. They learn about the types of student supports, they learn about our character program, which is P.R.I.C.E.

Furthermore, all freshmen are required to participate in a Freshman Guided Study Hall that helps teachers work with students to ensure they are developing the skills needed to be successful at Northeast High School. Jessica, a Social Studies teacher, elaborated that the Freshmen Study Hall is "every week up to the first two months and then it's like every other week where we talk to our freshmen about scheduling, about communication, how to write an email, how to sign up for a resource, 'cause it's required for all students to go to a resource period with one of their teachers."

James, an Associate Principal, shared that school members developed twelve research-based outcomes that they felt were necessary for students to

master during their freshman year to be successful throughout high school. When explaining the make-up of the twelve outcomes, James stated:

> Three of [the outcomes] are around academics, three of them are around just understanding the logistics of the building and the schedule and all that, three are around social-emotional learning, and three are around academic improvement planning, where we said if kids can demonstrate these 12 things, they can fully realize what it is to access [Northeast] and be successful, whether they're gonna go on to Harvard or MIT, or whether they're gonna go to the military or have other plans.

James explained that student progress towards mastering the twelve outcomes is monitored by teachers in freshmen advisory and study hall:

> They actually create a portfolio to demonstrate these outcomes in both advisory and Freshman Study Hall...and based on how the kid is doing, they can either have absolutely no supports and they're able to do everything independently or we support them in different ways throughout the school day.

When explaining the types of additional support that students would have access to if they had not demonstrated proficiency of the twelve outcomes, James explained that they have "access to peer tutoring, a writing center, and teacher assistance during enrichment period." Jessica elaborated that "we schedule them in enrichment periods, which are about two 40-minute blocks twice a week, and extracurriculars can be done during enrichment or a teacher can request a student come and see them, and we also have a resource period every day."

Katie shared that all students are required to enroll in a course called LEAD. She elaborated that the objective of the course is to have students understand their learning styles and improve their study skills. Katie related that the course is "called LEAD, Learn, Explore,

Achieve, Develop," and it is usually completed during a student's 9th or 10th grade year. Throughout this semester-long course, students complete learning profiles to better understand how they learn, how to improve their study skills, and how to access resource.

In addition to programming all students in classes that work to improve the institutional knowledge of the students, Jessica shared that students could access additional resources if they begin to struggle with their classes. She explained, "[W]e do peer tutoring, peer mentoring… So, a student, if they're struggling, say in math or language arts or social studies can get connected with the peer tutor." Jessica related that peer tutoring is an additional resource students can access to help them achieve.

Although Northeast implemented several structures to support students, the unique characteristic of being a Union High School was mentioned as a barrier for Northeast. Being a Union High School District means that the high school is the one and only school in the district. When discussing a challenge of being a Union High School, Matthew stated:

> One of the problems...with our school is we're a Union School District, so we don't have a K-12 approach. We do a lot of collaboration with our partners, but it's still not a K-12 curriculum and instructional system.

Matthew expressed that Northeast High School meets with the middle and elementary schools that send students to their school; however, it was still challenging to have all the schools align their instructional practices and curriculum. To assist students with the transition to Northeast from a "sister" school, school personnel instituted summer orientation and freshmen study halls.

Like Northeast, South High School implemented structures to support students. For example, during a special education department meeting, the team identified a higher number of students that were failing classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the participants were

preparing for students to return to in-person learning for the last month of the school year, they discussed how a resource room would be available to help students with disability labels that were not in co-taught classes. Anna, a Special Education teacher, shared, “there's a Special Ed teacher that [co-teaches in each English class for] 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, [and] 12th grade… We also have supports in math, so the kids need three levels of math, so algebra, geometry, and then advanced math.” She clarified that English and math classes were the only courses that incorporated a co-teaching model at South.

Anna explained that South utilizes a resource room to assist students with disability labels that are not programmed into a co-taught class. She disclosed that “a para-professional [is] staffed in the room almost all day every day... Teachers can sign up to have kids in unsupported sections go there for some one-on-one help, take tests, or make up an assignment if they were absent.” Anna further explained that “[The resource room] is a big
help during standardized testing windows. We have small group setting in many IEPs and that room is where we provide that accommodation.”

Anna stated, “We are fully IB... We only have maybe four or five classes that are not IB classes... We have some reading intervention classes and a math intervention class to help kids who have skill-deficit in those areas.” Anna communicated that students with disability labels are enrolled in the intervention classes if they have a math or reading goal in their IEP. Anna shared that the reading intervention class is taught by a special education teacher with a reading license. When discussing what happens in the intervention classes, Anna disclosed:

> They read smaller novels just to practice their skills. And then we also have this other area called our PBL, Personalized Blended Learning. And there too, there's math and reading for that, and the kids do a combination of teacher-led things and then computer

> things [for] skill building. And [the] intervention class is all based on building their skills in either math or reading.

Anna reiterated that the intervention classes are in addition to the general education classes and are not a replacement for those classes.

A support that is available to students is the ability to work with a teacher or peer tutor after school. Claire explained, “It's called S.A.W., Student Academic Workroom… It's for a significant amount of time after school. Teachers, Sped and general education tutor kids, or it can be a space where the kids need to come in work on a group project.” Anna elaborated that the Student Academic Workroom is:

> three days a week, and it's for an hour and a half after school, and kids can come there… One day, there's a math teacher, so if they need help with math, they go during the math teacher day. There's a science teacher and an English teacher. One of our special education aides works the S.A.W. every night.

Anna shared that teachers who volunteer to run the workroom are provided with an hourly stipend.

In addition to receive additional support after school, all students are enrolled in an Academic and Career Planning (ACP) period. Lidia explained that “there's an hour, the ACP… A teacher might schedule a 15-minute meeting with…students on their caseload, different days to go through specific skills.” Anna, a Special Education teacher, shared she will often use the ACP time to work with students on “their self-advocacy skills, where they can go, not only to me but to their other teachers... [I will help them] make appointments to schedule retakes on assessments.” She explained that structured ACP lessons are presented to students during this

time 2-3 days a week. Students have the flexibility to work with teachers when lessons are not scheduled during the ACP period.

Another support that South High School implements is a College and Career Center. Student can access the College and Career Center to receive assistance with the college application process. When discussing the utilization of the College and Career Center, Kora explained:

> [The flagship university] comes two times a week, and [the representatives] work with...[students]... [F]amilies come in, so they...can do their FAFSA, the guidance counselors come down here a lot, and then they work with the students.

Kora related that the College and Career Center was a valuable resource to inform students and families with the college enrollment process. Additionally, she said that she will often hold meetings with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and families of students with disability labels.

Both Northeast and South implemented resources to help students be successful in their general education classes. Northeast implemented enrichment periods, guided study halls, peer-tutoring, and LEAD to help students manage and complete schoolwork. To help students complete their schoolwork, South offered time for students to work with teachers during ACP, access to intervention classes, a resource room, and after school assistance in the S.A.W. The supports implemented in each school aligned with their institutional definition of "achievement" and assisted students with improving their academic outcomes.

Service Delivery Model. Both schools had a service delivery model focused on instructing students with disability labels in the general education environment. For example, South High School implemented a co-teaching model to service students with disability

labels and Northeast implemented ICS as a framework to build a collaborative co-plan to co-serve model to provide services to students in the general education environment.

When describing South's service delivery model, Lidia stated, "it's not self-contained. It's largely co-teaching... [South] has stuck largely with co-teaching." She explained that all students with disability labels are programmed into the general education environment except for when students receive accommodations in the resource room or if the student has an intellectual disability label. Lidia shared that students with intellectual disability labels are not enrolled in the IB classes. This population of students receive their education in a special education environment using an alternate curriculum.

The use of co-teaching provides support to all the students in the classroom. Anna, a Special Education teacher described her co-teaching relationship, "[W]e discuss all the kids, not just the Special Ed kids, and I work with all the kids, not just the Special Ed kids." When discussing her collaboration with her co-teacher, Anna stated, "she and I would just naturally talk about the struggles that the kids were having [with poetry in English], and it would come up that maybe we should change the poet." Co-teaching provided the opportunity for students to receive assistance from two teachers. Additionally, the special and general educators were able to collaborate with one another to improve the curriculum.

Claire further explained, "I work very closely with the...ninth grade teachers... and help them incorporate modifications to the actual lesson... Sometimes it's I'm gonna create just a separate thing to provide support or I'm like, 'Yeah, you should include that for everyone'." Anna and Claire communicated that the co-teaching model benefited all the students in the classroom and not just those with disability labels. When the co-teachers collaborated, they discussed and implemented strategies that were used with all students.

At South, co-teachers developed their own system to collaborate on their lessons, rather than having a school-wide approach. For example, Claire explained:

> We stay after class and we're like, 'Okay, this student is doing very well. This student needs a little extra love', and we assign each other tasks of what needs to be done...I just simply text with them too, brainstorm ideas 'cause it's just easier... And then they share Google Docs with me, and I'll respond saying like, 'Hey, this actually looks really good for Sped students,' or... 'Okay, I'm gonna modify this.' And then I'll share that Google doc with them, 'This is a modified form, let me know if there's any standards that I accidentally took out by mistake.'

Claire shared that it was less common for her to have a formal time planned to sit with her co-teachers and collaborate on the curriculum. At South High School, there was not a school-wide system in place for departments to formally collaborate with the special education teachers. However, co-teachers developed systems that worked for their individual situations.

In addition to not having structures in place for formal collaboration, participants identified other challenges to serving students with disability labels. For example, Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator, shared that her leadership at South High School was limited since she is only at that school a couple of days a week:

> It's kind of limited in terms of overall school leadership. I'm there twice a week. And so, the bulk of my work is done specifically with special education teachers. And I work closely with one of our assistant principals who is designated as the specialized services administrator...and then I also work with the principal. But in terms of building-wide school leadership, my overall role, it's not that broad.

Lidia shared that she works at South two days a week because she is also also responsible for two other high schools in the district. When explaining how she supports teachers at South, she said, “When we're meeting as a department, a lot of our time is spent on IEP writing and compliance-driven type stuff. My individual meetings with teachers are spent on student needs and teacher practices.” Lidia’s role at South High School was more focused on IEP compliance and coaching teachers when they sought her out for individual questions. Lidia held conversations with building administrators, but she was less involved with the development or implementation of larger systemic changes to service students with disability labels in the general education environment.

In contrast to South, participants at Northeast shared that all students were provided instruction in the general education environment, including students with labels of ID. When explaining where students are provided instruction, Katie stated, “as a building we are inclusive, period, end of sentence.” She further clarified that all students regardless of disability label were enrolled in the general education classes. Jessica reiterated that all students receive instruction in the general education environment. When discussing students with intellectual disability labels, she explained, “We're definitely inclusive in the classroom and have them involved in everything that we do. Some need additional support where we have paras. I work with the para to help support the students, too, in the classroom.”

James, an Associate Principal, shared that school members are continually looking at the current service delivery model to make sure it is benefitting all students. He mentioned that data is collected regularly to determine which parts of the school system needed to be improved to better assist students with being successful. Regarding the reasoning for regular data collection, James explained:

> Every 15 days, we run data... We noticed some patterns with some teams of teachers where students were not being successful. So, with that, kinda looked at what are the different supports we have to...provide the adults. 'Cause what we're trying to do, is also flip to the philosophy that we're not trying to fix kids, we're trying to fix the system. We're owning when students are not successful.

James emphasized that it was important to adjust the current structure of the school if students are not currently being successful instead of expecting students to adjust to the current structure in place.

James mentioned that one of the methods to improve the school system was the implementation of ICS. A foundation of ICS is that all students are provided instruction in the general education environment regardless of label. James emphasized that the current ICS structure was intentionally designed to provide teachers with built-in support and to provide teachers with a collaborative environment to strengthen each other's skill sets. Additionally, the administrative team provided each PLC with an agenda template to help guide discussions and curriculum planning. When I observed the English PLC, every agenda included Dufour's (2006) four questions:

1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

The purpose of these questions is to keep school members focused on being solution-oriented and to guide discussion on improving student success.

In addition to the ICS model, James elaborated that additional supports have been put in place to improve the school system. For example, he stated, “We used a multiple tiered approach. There was building-wide PD, admins supported departments and course teams (i.e., biology, algebra, English 9, etc.), and our instructional coaches supported individual teachers and teams.” An administrator or instructional coach was assigned to the course teams to help facilitate conversations on student “achievement” and provide feedback on current teaching practices. James explained that additional support may be provided to individual teachers or teams:

> When the SST noticed a pattern [of high numbers of students failing a class], either the admin that was assigned to a team and/or the instructional coaches met with the teacher and/or teams and worked through the PLC process [Dufour's 4 questions].

If the SST noticed that there were a high number of students not being successful in a class, James communicated that a process was in place to improve the delivery of instruction to the students. James elaborated that the administrative team, “looked at data, talked about students' needs, coached on strategies, and then monitored the data.” Once processes were implemented to improve the instruction in the classrooms, the administrative team and SST monitored student grades every two weeks to determine if the supports put into place were benefitting the students.

The participants communicated that a foundational aspect of ICS is to ensure that every class reflects the student demographics of Northeast. When discussing having a natural proportion of students in classes, James stated:

> In our regular ed classes, we've achieved it, which is... we're not over-representing groups… So, what our next steps are, are those upper-level courses... We're not gonna [*sic*] say, "Every kid needs to take three AP classes," but every kid should have the skills

to take the classes that are getting them where they want to be. And we're not there yet... I'm proud of where we are, but not satisfied.

In this quote, James explained that most students had access to most general education classes regardless of whether the students had a label. He also noted that analyzing access to classes is a continual process that is still a work-in-progress. James acknowledged that there was still work to do in the advanced placement (AP) courses.

While both schools intentionally worked toward supporting students in the general education environment, this was managed differently at each school. At Northeast High School, there is a systemic process to have special and general educators meet weekly as a PLC to co-plan for all students. The resources and teaching strategies developed during the PLC meetings are made available for all teachers. At South, special education teachers only meet with the general education teacher they directly support and any resources that they develop are only shared with them.

Process of Deciding on Individual Supports for Students.

Participants at both schools shared the presence of systemic barriers that could impact the learning of students. In addition to sharing potential barriers, the participants identified individual student supports that were implemented to help students be more successful. In the next sections, I will explain how school members identified individual concerns. Then, I will share how school members addressed the individual needs of students.

Identifying Individual Concerns. During the SST meetings at Northeast, much of the focus was on discussing concerns that team members had for specific students. The meetings were structured with an agenda outlining the specific students that were going to be discussed along with the team member who would be leading the discussion. For

example, Andrea, a School Counselor, led a discussion on a student who was struggling with mental health. Andrea updated the team on the student's history of negative self-talk and anxiety regarding missing assignments. She further shared strategies that had been used the previous year such as teachers providing a "Pass" grade by having the student complete alternate assignments to demonstrate competency of the standards. Andrea asked the rest of the team for assistance with a plan moving forward to help ease the student's anxiety. The team suggested weekly check-ins with the student and setting up a meeting with the student's parents to discuss a schedule change to accommodate a study hall.

Instead of addressing school-wide systems, the team focused much of their time on individual student needs. For example, the agenda for every meeting would include a list of 5-7 students with notes discussing current concerns that teachers have for each student. Teacher concerns often included topics such as attendance, missing assignments, mental health, engagement, failing classes, and other circumstances. Marybeth voiced frustration that meetings did not allocate more time to discuss greater school-wide concerns:

> I know myself and the school counselors, in the past, when we have seen [high numbers of students failing a class], we have said to our district leaders, 'This is a problem. This needs to be addressed.' ...We have said before we wanna talk about school-wide things, not just specific students because, sure, if [a student] is failing Algebra, that's a problem, but there's 90 kids failing Algebra, so can we talk about that problem?

Marybeth communicated that if there were high numbers of students failing a specific class then the other issue that needed to be addressed was the instruction in the classroom. She appeared to be frustrated that most of the time in SST was addressing symptoms of a larger systemic

problem. Since the goal of the SST is to look at individual students, there may need to be another level of review to identify systemic issues.

The only systemic issue that was discussed at several meetings was the inconsistency in school grading policies. Participants often noted that it was challenging to develop plans for students when there was not a uniform grading policy. For example, in one of the SST meetings, Jessica explained that the final composition of a student's grade varied from one teacher to the next. Some teachers weigh summative assessments more heavily, or some teachers may have an increased weight for formative assessments when calculating a final grade. During the meeting, Ron, a School Counselor, mentioned that some teachers entered a zero score for missing assignments whereas other teachers may enter a 50% for a missing assignment which would significantly influence a student's final grade.

During another meeting, Matthew shared his belief that it was "silly" that there was not a uniform policy in the current grading system. When discussing a student who did not attend school for an extended period due to mental health concerns, Jessica mentioned that it was up to the individual teacher to determine which assignments should be exempt or modified. Jessica further explained that the point-person assigned to this student will need to develop individual plans with each of the student's teachers since they would each address the student's absence differently. During this discussion, a team member interrupted and stated that it was an equity issue that some teachers were giving students zeros for missing assignments. Furthermore, Matthew stated that he was "floored" when he observed a teacher assign 100 points for participation which was equivalent to a summative assessment. After this comment, Mitchell asked Matthew if he could bring this concern to the District Leadership Team. At a follow-up

meeting, Matthew shared that he brought the grading concern to the District Leadership Team and that they were aware of the issue.

When members of the SST developed a plan for a student there was a section that was titled "Next Steps" and a team member was assigned to follow through on that plan.
For example, a specific team member was assigned the task of contacting the student's family and facilitating a connection between the student and school-based supports such as the writing center, peer tutor, or specific adults. During the SST meetings, the team discussed new students each week; however, if a student was referred to the team again then the team would discuss the effectiveness of the previous support and then brainstorm innovative ideas as a team. During one of my observations, the agenda had two students listed with the note "High Priority Revisit" in parentheses. Furthermore, at the end of every meeting, the team would share celebrations of students who improved their grades and/or the issue identified impacting their learning.

Every meeting had a detailed agenda that kept the members of the team on track and focused on the topics being discussed. Seldom did participants deviate from the topics named on the meeting agenda. In each of the meetings observed, participants diligently documented the proceedings of the meeting. Additionally, the names of the participants were listed next to action steps that needed to be completed following the meeting. For example, during an SST meeting a student who had many missing assignments and struggled to complete work on time was discussed. The team identified that math was an area of concern for the student. SST members suggested that Katie, the Math Instructional Coach, could provide mini math lessons to the student during study hall period. In a later meeting, Katie stated:

> The student, during their study hall, joined my Zoom and we reviewed for a test. He asked us questions and I have a whiteboard here. We're doing the problems and he's like, 'I get it now.' Sometimes we just have to make the 2D a 3D experience.

Katie shard that the instructional strategies developed during the SST meeting were successful with helping this student develop their math skills. She explained that she has a flexible schedule to meet with students during their study halls unlike the classroom teachers.

In contrast to Northeast, the faculty at South High School did not have specific teams of school members that discussed the struggles of individual students. School members at South implemented a culture of taking a personalized approach to identifying student needs. Participants reported that teachers and administrators prioritize meetings with students to better understand their goals and their plans once they graduate from high school. Two new school members at South High School shared that holding individual meetings with students was more prevalent at South compared to their previous schools. For example, as the transition coordinator, Kora explained:

> I'm thinking of the product that we're producing more than I did when I was just a classroom teacher. And then the combination with being here at [South] where these students actually sit down with their guidance counselors... That's huge. They did not do that at [my previous school] ever.

Mandi reiterated that holding individual meetings with students was an essential part of helping students be successful in their classes. She explained that she holds meetings with students to help them develop a plan to improve their work completion. For example, when discussing her meetings with a student, Mandi stated:

> We've been identifying two classes at a time that he can focus on, to say, let's find an assignment or two from this class, let's meet with this teacher in this class to get caught up... You can hear in his voice that he's doing a lot better, and these meetings have been going well.

The new school members shared that they felt South High School was unique when it came to the amount of time prioritized for personalizing the learning of students. They mentioned that it was not just the teachers who spent time meeting with students, but it was a collective school effort. Teachers, student services team, and administrators took the initiative to better understand the needs and interests of students.

Although participants reported that educators at South take pride in the amount of time spent holding individual conversations, they also reported that a barrier was a lack of personnel in certain areas of expertise. When discussing a lack of personnel, Claire shared:

> how spread thin special education teachers are, [that] there's such a shortage, and as a result, we can't fully give all of the students the attention that they need because of the high number of caseloads district wide.

Claire described that caseloads were approximately 20 students for each special education teacher. She noted that teachers were not able to spend the same amount of time with every student. Claire expressed she worked most often with the students she encountered in her co-taught classes or the students that had parents who reached out more frequently.

School members at Northeast and South collaborated to identify the needs of students. However, the two schools implemented different methods to better understand student concerns that needed to be addressed. The administrative team at Northeast developed a structured team approach to identify the needs of students. The SST collaborated weekly to identify barriers that

prevented individuals from being successful. In contrast to Northeast, school members at South did not develop a team to identify barriers. Participants identified that a culture was developed where school members conferenced regularly with students to better understand their circumstances and made adjustments to better support the students. Participants at both schools worked to understand why students were not being successful in order to provide the students with additional support and address possible barriers.

Addressing Individual Needs. Once school members identified barriers that impacted the "achievement" of students, they worked together to address them. For example, during the SST meetings at Northeast, attendance was discussed as a major barrier for some students to be successful. When attendance was identified as a barrier, multiple participants volunteered to conduct a home visit to meet with the parents and students. Additionally, if transportation was an issue, then the participants would brainstorm ideas to help the family remedy this concern.

Mitchell described that his role as a School Counselor was to help eliminate the barriers that were preventing students from being successful. He shared that during the COVID-19 pandemic there were some students missing virtual school due to working during the school day. Mitchell shared that he felt it was part of his responsibility to reach out to the employers of some students that were struggling to balance work and school. He stated that, "I've called jobs and said, "Listen, this kid can't be working this much… that's not sustainable. That's not okay." Mitchell stated that the school members at Northeast are very flexible and willing to do what is needed to help students achieve. He shared "we're 100% in there and we're trying to eliminate the roadblocks from their life."

Marybeth explained that the COVID-19 pandemic created unique challenges for grading students. She communicated that Northeast has standard grading protocols; however, due to the

unique nature of having students attend classes virtually because of the school shutdown, teachers were provided freedom to adjust grading policies on an individual student basis. For example, Marybeth explained:

> Because [of the COVID-19 pandemic], we're kind of doing [grading] case by case… "Okay, so who could get a pass instead of a letter grade?" Well, there isn't a specific policy for that, it's just if you are the point-person for that family and you know that student needs that, then that student can do that.

Marybeth explained that due to the challenges brought forth by the pandemic, teachers were provided flexibility with the grading policies. During the SST meetings, the members discussed students that may benefit with a Pass/Fail grading policy. If the team members agreed on incorporating a Pass/Fail policy, then a point-person was assigned to meet with the student's teacher to identify the specific learning targets that the student had to demonstrate proficiency for a Pass.

Another systemic barrier identified was access to mental health services. Marybeth and Mitchell each discussed communicating with mental health agencies to either supply mental health services or help students transition between in-patient therapy facilities and school. Marybeth shared:

> We have a lot of students with anxiety, a lot of students suffering from depression, so really supporting them, and making sure that they're still accessing their education and having what they need in order to do that. We do have a lot of students, unfortunately, that go into long-term mental health treatment, so not only helping them in a one-on-one setting, but also being the liaison between the treatment facility and our school, and

> teachers and families, and making sure that everybody kind of knows how to support that student while they're in treatment.

Faculty often worked together to develop individualized plans for students returning to school due to a variety of circumstances. During the SST meetings, a participant was identified as the point-person for that student's plan and then given the responsibility to communicate the plan to the student's teachers. A student who had recently been discharged from a treatment facility due to a lack of attendance was discussed at an SST meeting. Since her return to school, there was a report of a lack of attendance and engagement. The team discussed options for credit recovery and providing the student with a non-failure withdrawal for the time she spent in the treatment program. The student's school counselor and school social worker shared that they were collaborating with the student's therapist to develop a support plan. On the agenda, the initials of the counselor and social worker were typed in the "next steps" section stating that they will finalize a support plan and then share it out with the student's teachers.

Unlike Northeast, teachers at South reported that there was not a school-wide collaborative approach to address individual student barriers. Claire mentioned that if a student on her caseload is struggling with math content, she will call the student's parent to arrange for the student to receive assistance with a math teacher after school:

> With special education kids, it's discussed as a strategy of, in addition, to what special education supports [they receive], [if] you need further help after that, you should go to S.A.W. and get support there. And you really use that resource to get help with math.

Claire explained that individual teachers work to identify strategies to help students be more successful. She shared that she will often communicate with colleagues and the students' families to develop additional supports to assist the students.

Like Claire, Anna shared that she often meets with students to develop plans to be more successful in their classes. For example, she shared that History classes do not usually have a special education teacher in the classroom as a co-teacher. If there is a student on Anna's caseload who is struggling in History, she will facilitate a plan with the student to help improve their grade. For example, she explained that she would reach out to the History teacher to determine why a student may not be achieving. Anna explained:

> Well, maybe they missed this assignment or that assignment, so then one of the ways that I would do [to help] is I would locate the kid say, "Hey, what's going on in [your history] class? [The teacher] said you're missing an assignment. Do we need to stay after school? Do I need to see you during ACP? Do you need to make an appointment with [your history teacher]?

Anna stated that she would help facilitate meetings between the student and their teachers to help improve their grades. Additionally, she noted that it was largely left up to the special education teacher to facilitate the conversations to develop plans to help students with disability labels achieve after a barrier is identified. It seemed that the special education teacher has to be diligent with monitoring students grades otherwise there is the protentional for students to fall through the cracks.

Anna communicated that teachers work to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning using a variety of methods. For example, Anna stated that students are required to complete an assignment called Personal Project. The goal of the project is to develop student inquiry based on the interests of the students. When describing the objective of the project, Anna related the "inquiry part is that kids are supposed to ask questions, figure out the answers, and present what they learned in a format of their choosing. The project has a circle

of inquiry that starts with planning, applying, and reflection." Students are provided with a template to assist them with the four phases of the project. First, students conduct an Investigating Phase to research a topic and state their goal for their project. Next, students complete a Planning Phase where they state a Success Criteria and develop a timeline for completing their project. Third, students develop a Taking Action Phase where they provide a description of their final product. Finally, students evaluate their project and provide a personal reflection in the Reflection Phase. Students are required to complete all four phases of the template; however, students can research a topic of their choosing. To complete this assignment, students were provided with a template to guide their investigation on a topic of their choice. Additionally, teachers conferenced with students during each phase of the project to help facilitate their learning.

School members at each school strived to address barriers to student "achievement" once they were identified. Personnel at Northeast implemented a structured collaborative approach to develop action plans to assist students during their weekly SST meetings. Faculty at South utilized special education teachers to take the lead to develop plans for students on their caseloads who were experiencing barriers to their learning.

Taking Steps Toward Equitable Access to Education?

In addition to Foundational Beliefs and Understandings and Developing Processes and Supports, the third theme identified through data analysis was Equitable Access to Education? School personnel related an understanding that there are current school structures that are not equitable for all students. Although there have been some processes instituted to make school more equitable, there are still practices in place that perpetuate inequitable access to learning opportunities for some students. In the following sections I will explain that

although school personnel took steps towards providing equitable access to education, equitable access was not always truly provided. First, I will explain how participants at each school demonstrated race consciousness and an awareness of the inequities that exist within schools. In this study, race consciousness refers to school members understanding that inequities exist in school between racial groups. Additionally, it refers to school members understanding that school systems were developed with a White norm that puts certain students at a disadvantage. Next, I will identify how the participants demonstrated an awareness of the inequities that exist between students with and without disability labels. Finally, I will examine whether and how the participants used their awareness to enact systemic action.

Race Consciousness. When Anna explained the diversity of South High School, she stated, "we actually have a very large Hispanic population and... No, it's a Latin, Latinx. They have...Mexican heritage, and so Latinx, that's what we're supposed to say now." Anna appeared to have a desire to be politically correct when referring to the cultural composition of the school. At the same time, she was still working through the process of becoming more comfortable talking about identity-marking characteristics including race, ethnicity, and nationality. Anna was aware that there was a proper way to refer to specific racial groups and worked to use the appropriate terminology.

Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator at South, explained, "our population of students that has the most challenges is our Black males, particularly those with an emotional behavioral disability." Lidia elaborated on why Black males with an EBD label were having the most challenges, in that "there is the inherent bias that exists in education, that exists among our teachers… Our teaching staff is a largely White staff." Like Lidia, Mandi, a Special Education teacher, shared that conversations focus on "knowing that in schools, students of color are

disproportionately bearing the brunt of disciplinary action." Lidia and Mandi expressed that a cultural mismatch exists between the White teachers and their students. However, they did not share that steps were being taken to address this known problem.

In contrast, Claire, a Special Education teacher, explained that teachers at South are "inclusive of multiple identities… we as a staff really promote acceptance of all identities, all backgrounds, all races, all heritage." She related that teachers work to foster an environment where all students feel included and valued. Claire further explained that an awareness of inclusiveness is promoted through "book clubs on race... [focusing on] how to better incorporate conversations about race [into the curriculum], especially since we have a pretty high White percentage staff."

Mandi clarified that the book club was "an optional book study for staff." In response to a question asking if there were objectives aligned with the book club, Mandi stated, "There probably were. Not that I remember offhand. I think [it was meant to] just hav[e] a space to converse with staff members about issues of race in the classroom." Although opportunities were put into place to facilitate faculty collaboration on race, they were often provided on a voluntary basis. Since opportunities to discuss race were voluntary, it did not appear to be a current building priority.

In addition to book clubs, South provided teachers with PD opportunities to better understand issues of race and equity. For example, Claire explained that PD on equity was offered to school members:

> There's one this year called The LiberatED, like liberated and then they capitalize the ED. I personally did not participate because I had a conflicting thing, but I've heard it's awesome.... And then the district…has some PDs that are helpful.

Like the optional book clubs, there was not a structured school-wide presentation required for all school members, suggesting that PD that focuses on furthering the understanding of school personnel on the topic of racial equity was not a priority.

Similar to there being no systemic process to provide equity PD, there was not a schoolwide plan to engage students in conversations on issues of race. For example, Mandi related, "I've had some one-on-one conversations [with students] … feeling … worried about police brutality or about equity issues, the recent surge in hate crimes against Asian populations." When holding these conversations with students, Mandi explained that she often responds by letting the student know, "It is unfair that you have this emotional burden that's really weighing on you that is definitely distracting you from school." She related that her conversations with students are often to acknowledge the student's feelings and work to provide them with comfort. Although Mandi is working hard to be supportive for her students, the lack of broader structured conversations involving issues of race may have little impact in changing the current White norm in schools.

When responding to a question regarding whether she discusses equity with her colleagues, she said, "Off the top of my mind, thinking about conversations of race or equity… I cannot think of any recent [discussions] that [have] come up at a department meeting." Similar to the lack of conversations with students, conversations focused on racial equity did not appear to be widespread at South.

Like South High School, participants at Northeast High School expressed an understanding of inequities within the school system. Matthew, an Instructional Coach, acknowledged the existence of academic gaps among Black and White students attending Northeast. He explained that the academic gaps were a result of systemic racism in schools:

> Our African American population historically underperforms according to any other group, without a doubt...why are there such a disproportionate low representation of African American kids reading at grade level or reading at a very high level? So unfortunately...systemic racism that exists within our schools, within our society has prevented certain kids from being as successful as they can be. I mean we just have to be truthful about it.

Like Matthew, James explained, “Our entire school system is built for White affluent people to be successful, and if you're not that normative coming in, there's gonna be systemic roadblocks to becoming successful.” Matthew and James appeared to understand that there are inequities that exist in schools. They were aware that the existing “achievement” gaps amongst racial groups were the result of an education system that privileges White students and places other students at a disadvantage.

Mitchell, a School Counselor at Northeast, stated, “Students of color traditionally are less apt to ask for help… We have to drag them to the table a little bit more than…our Caucasian students or Asian students.” Mitchell is aware that students of color struggled to seek out assistance at Northeast. However, there did not appear to be a more in-depth reflection on the causes of these differences. Mitchell did not consider that asking for help is an attitude and skill established in certain families and communities based on assumptions of rights, trust, and entitlement. Additionally, he could work to find other avenues to address the needs of the students instead of placing the responsibility on the students.

Jessica, a Social Studies teacher, communicated that she would like her colleagues to focus less on the “achievement” gap and spend more time examining the systemic processes in place at Northeast: “[We need to] change the structural sense within our school to not focus

solely on this Black versus White divide, which inherently is based on testing that isn't necessarily for the benefit of students of color anyway." Jessica understood that the inequities based on race were further solidified by the outcomes of standardized tests. Additionally, she acknowledged that more work had to be done besides just being aware that academic disparities are present.

During an English PLC meeting, teachers were collaborating on the books to read in the upcoming unit. The teachers mentioned that historically, books were chosen based on the interest of the individual teachers instead of the interests of the students. The team was conscientious to identify books that would appeal to a range of high school students. One teacher stated that "there was a need to consider a range of books because a book that is interesting to a White middle-aged woman is not necessarily interesting to an African American high school male." The English teachers showed there was a need to take the interest of students and the representation of historically marginalized people into account when selecting books for their class. The department realized their current book selection disadvantaged students of color. The English PLC has taken steps to consider the needs of their students when developing curriculum.

Similar to the English PLC, Marybeth, a School Social Worker, has taken steps towards addressing inequities at Northeast. Marybeth said, "[A]s a social worker, we have a code of ethics, and one of them is ...that you're dedicated to fighting systemic racism and making sure that there's equity." She explained that it was her responsibility as the school social worker to be an advocate for families. Marybeth noted it was her role to eliminate inequities as a barrier to a student's learning.

In addition to fighting systemic racism, Marybeth explained that she works to address inequities that exist due to a student's socioeconomic status
(SES) which disproportionally impacts students of color. When explaining how she works to make sure there is equity, Marybeth shared that "one example would be students on the free and reduced lunch, so making sure that not only are they receiving a free lunch, but that it's equitable lunch." For example, she explained that she makes sure that students on free and reduced lunch are provided the same lunch options as other students. Marybeth added that she works with "students who qualify for free lunch and…mak[e] sure... there's no barriers for those families when it comes to extracurriculars." Marybeth had a sense of responsibility to ensure that students had access to similar opportunities regardless of a student's socioeconomic status. She shared a belief that all students should have the opportunity to enjoy a nutritious lunch and be able to participate in extracurricular activities regardless of how much money their families made.

Participants at both South and Northeast recognized that systemic inequities
existed between students of color and White students. At South, they communicated that conversations on racial inequities were becoming more prevalent in the building. However, it appeared that improving racial equity was not a top priority since examples of these conversations were not in evidence and many of the professional development opportunities were voluntary. At Northeast, the English PLC brought in text to capture the interest of students and Marybeth worked to provide opportunities for students. Despite awareness and discussion around race, steps toward action still needed to occur. However, awareness and discussion are the first steps toward enacting change.

Awareness that Students with Disability Labels have Different Experiences. Participants at Northeast expressed an awareness that students with disability labels have

different experiences at school compared to those who do not have disability labels. For example, Jessica, a Social Studies teacher at Northeast, related that she had a student in her class that "had an IEP in middle school but decided not to have an IEP in high school because of the stigma." Jessica noted that some students are more susceptible to experiencing a negative self-image because of the perception people have regarding students receiving special education services.

In addition to experiencing a negative self-image, Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator at South, recognized that students with disability labels are often viewed differently than their peers without disability labels. For example, Lidia said, "At [South]…there is still a big difference between the mindset of teachers in terms of a successful student with an IEP and a successful student without. And bridging that mindset is a challenge at [South]." Lidia elaborated:

> [South] is an all IB school, so every class is attached to the IB standards, which are different from state standards… A successful student at [South] demonstrates all of these IB learning profile characteristics… [and] there's still growth needed in terms of expecting those same characteristics in our students with disabilities.

Lidia communicated that students with disability labels may not be held to the same high expectations as their peers without disability labels.

Similar to Lidia, James, an Associate Principal at Northeast, communicated that there are different expectations for students with disability labels at Northeast. He explained that students with disability labels are not well-represented in higher-level courses at Northeast. When explaining a need to have more representation of students with disability labels in general education classes, James stated that "Our next steps are… those upper-level courses… And we're

not there yet." He emphasized that he was proud that most of the general education classes consisted of natural proportions. However, he acknowledged that students with disability labels rarely were enrolled in upper-level courses. Lidia agreed and explained that "When you get into the higher-level classes, there are fewer and fewer students [with disability labels] who are in those [higher level classes]." James expressed that it is his goal to ensure students with disabilities can enroll in an AP course if they choose. He communicated that teachers should hold students with disability labels to high expectations and develop entry points for them to access a more challenging curriculum. Although James would like to see students with disability labels be enrolled in upper-level courses, steps have not been taken to provide them with equitable access to these opportunities.

Lidia related that she believes teachers want to include students with disability labels but "there's a hard time moving from the mindset of, so [students with disability labels] can't do it, to how do I need to adjust this, so that this is accessible to this student." In response to a question asking what was preventing teachers from shifting their mindset, she explained, "Not all teachers… get that training, they don't know. And so, there is a tendency, I think, to cluster what a student's needs are just because they have an IEP, versus understanding individual differences." Lidia indicated that teachers have not received the necessary training to differentiate curriculum to meet the needs of a range of learners. However, it appeared that there was not a process in place to build capacity in teachers to develop lessons that incorporated multiple entry points for students to access the curriculum.

For example, Lidia explained that as students advance through school, writing becomes an integral part of the curriculum:

> [The IB curriculum] becomes more challenging in...grades 11 and 12...for students with disabilities because the writing becomes very intensive. And that becomes harder to accommodate for a student...And that's where...a teacher may struggle.

Lidia noted the need for a student to develop their writing skills as they progress in high school. However, it did not seem that there was an expectation for teachers to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. It seemed that Lidia identified that teachers were not differentiating lessons to provide access for students; however, a process was not put into action to ensure students were provided the opportunity to access the curriculum based on their current entry point.

Not only were students with disability labels struggling to access the curriculum, Jessica, a Social Studies teacher at Northeast, related that the SST started “noticing some disproportionality as far as grades with students of color with disabilities versus White students with disabilities.” Jessica clarified that more students of color with disability labels were failing classes than White students with disability labels. She further expressed that the team is “trying to figure out, is that an issue with rapport with teachers, is it an issue with non-cultural understanding, are [students of color] legitimately struggling academically, are [students of color] getting what they need from specific teachers?” Jessica communicated that there is not only a difference in the way students with and without disability labels experience school, but the intersectionality of race and disability can create further differences for students. Jessica presented questions that school personnel need to analyze to make sure students with disability labels are provided with equitable learning opportunities. She explained that school members should consider several factors to better understand why a student may be

struggling in school. For example, she communicated that reflection should occur to determine if a student has a good rapport with teachers or if there is a non-cultural understanding.

The participants at South and Northeast demonstrated an understanding that students with disability labels may have different experiences than students without disability labels. They communicated that a stigma exists towards students in special education. Additionally, teachers may have lower expectations for students with disability labels. At South, teachers were not always differentiating instruction that prevented some students with disability labels from accessing the curriculum. When developing curriculum, it is important to consider the questions Jessica presented in the previous paragraph to address the needs of students.

Are Current Processes Serving All Students? Participants at both schools incorporated their awareness of inequities to implement structures to support students. However, the structures put in place were often developed to help students meet the institutional definition of "achievement."

Lidia asserted that a key part of her role as the Special Education Coordinator at South was to make sure teachers are equipped to provide students with disability labels with the skills to be successful in their classrooms. She explained, "When I started this role at [South], I held meetings weekly with my EBD teachers...and just going through each student...We spend a lot of time talking about that, changing your focus on not passing classes, but developing skills." In this quote, it appeared Lidia chose to develop the capacity of a small group of teachers instead of developing a process to support all teachers in developing their capacity to work with students that have an EBD label. This process places the responsibility of instructing students with EBD disability labels solely on special education teachers even though the students are enrolled in some classes that only have a general education

teacher. Although steps were taken to provide some teachers with strategies to work with students with an EBD label, there was not a systemic process in place to help general educators work with all students.

Similar to the practice of coaching individual teachers, there was not a systemic process in place to address the mental health of students. In response to a question asking about the current process to assist students with their mental health, Claire, a Special Education teacher at South, stated, “I know what to do in individual cases. Like if a kid is having a mental health crisis...There's a whole list of people that I can contact, and they take it from there.” In response to a question asking about the processes in place for mental health concerns that were not an emergency, Claire stated, “I think the process, I'm still trying to figure it out honestly.” It did not appear that a process was in place at South to assist students that were experiencing challenges with their mental health unless the student was in immediate harm to themselves or other students. Mandi, a Special Education teacher at South, shared that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue during virtual learning. For example, she described a conversation she had with one of her students:

> About a month ago maybe, I got an email from a student... [It said something like,] ‘This semester has gotten off to a terrible start. I'm really struggling. I was struggling with my mental health over winter break. I never really got back on my feet. I'm failing a lot of classes. I don't know where to start, I'm feeling overwhelmed, I'm just discouraged.’ A very, very long email. Honestly very heartbreaking to read. And so, I was like, okay, we got plenty of time, grades aren't finalized until May. Let's start meeting. And so, we have been meeting at least once a week, oftentimes more.

When a student was struggling to manage their academics as a result of mental health challenges, the burden was on the student to reach out to a teacher for help. Although Mandi provided support to the student, the focus was on providing academic assistance instead of addressing the student's mental health needs.

Claire mentioned that teachers who advise the school's clubs are striving to address mental health issues. She explained, "[W]e just have a whole bunch of clubs like the LGBTQ Plus Alliance. And we have Hope Squad, which is really prioritizing mental health and suicide prevention." Claire believed that it was important that teachers who advise clubs felt accountable to discuss mental health concerns because of their relationship with students in their club and because she felt there was a lack of mental health services at South High School. However, this focus on mental health was only available to students who participated in a club at South. There was not a systemic process that addressed concerns related to mental health schoolwide.

When explaining a barrier to addressing mental health concerns, Claire stated, "how spread thin psych and social workers are." She shared that South currently only has two school social workers and two school psychologists. Additionally, Claire communicated that she knew the process to be followed when there was an immediate mental health emergency, but she was unaware if there was a long-term protocol in place to address mental health concerns. Mandi and Claire worked hard as individuals to assist their students with mental health concerns and staying current with their academics. However, there was not a schoolwide support system in place for the teachers to access additional assistance.

Regarding mental health concerns that arise at Northeast, Mitchell explained "We're getting our school social worker involved...before COVID, we were gonna have an actual therapy group..." Mitchell further explained that the therapy group would take place during the

school day and be paid for through the insurance of the students' parents. When further explaining the therapy group, he mentioned that a family's lack of insurance could be a barrier to receiving mental health support. Marybeth, a School Social Worker, further explained how the therapy sessions would be implemented at Northeast:

> We talk about remov[ing] barrier of access [and] are looking into bringing an agency into our building to help families have easier access to therapy. The school would only be the space, the agency would still run as it would in their private office. Meaning, yes, families would work through the agency for billing purposes. If families did not have insurance, they work with the agency to create a payment plan or other financial plan options.

Mental health was identified as a significant barrier for many students to access their instruction. Traveling to receive mental health services was one barrier that school personnel worked to address by partnering with a local mental health agency and having them come to the students at the school. However, this remedy for some created a barrier for others, who would be locked out of this on-campus service due to financial reasons.

Similar to the steps taken to support the mental health needs of their students, school members tried to support students with virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one concern that was created because of the Pass/Fail grading policy during virtual learning was whether students who received a Pass grade acquired the necessary skills to be successful in future classes. For example, during an SST meeting, Ron, a School Counselor, shared that a student named John was struggling in Spanish 2. Ron stated that, "Learning virtually…had different expectations for students than now…that students are back in-person." Mitchell, another School Counselor, interrupted and related that "There was a domino

effect… even though [John] earned a P [Pass]… he does not have mastery of [the skills required] for Spanish 2."

When students were struggling during virtual learning, school personnel worked to accommodate students by providing teachers with greater flexibility with grading policies. However, when school members focused more on credit attainment rather than skill development, a new barrier was created. When John did not develop the necessary foundational skills in Spanish 1, he struggled to be successful the following semester in Spanish 2.

During another SST meeting, Marybeth discussed that Courtney, a student at Northeast, was recently returning to school after being discharged from a treatment facility near the end of first semester. She explained that Courtney was a senior and well short of the 22 credits required for graduation. Marybeth shared, "I don't think she's been to a single class this school year." She further added that the student "is super focused on a to do list…[however] even if we give her assignments…I don't feel that she has the skills to be successful just doing the assignments on her own." Marybeth asked the team if they had ideas on how to close out the semester for Courtney because she also did not believe it was fair to give a student all Fs when they were in a treatment facility.

Ron agreed that providing a list of assignments would not be beneficial for Courtney because she might become discouraged with the content and shutdown. Mitchell suggested, "Maybe summer school [and we can come up with] some creative ways to get credits as well there...maybe extend school year past the end of the year and slide some of that stuff [into the summer]." Marybeth then asked, "If there are any classes where we can maybe pull a P out if she does a major summative or something if it can be a P, otherwise it will be a wash this semester?" Katie interjected, "I think she should have a chance to recover the credits and not

have all the Fs." Ron concluded that Marybeth "should communicate with teachers and ask if there is a path for the [student] to earn credit in their class and see what the responses are."

During this discussion of support for Courtney and her learning, the potentially viable options were to see if there were projects that she could complete on her own or "slide things into the summer." The conversation focused on how to meet the institutional definition of "achievement", and Courtney's emotional and learning needs were not part of the discussion. It appeared that the burden was going to be placed on Courtney to complete a larger assignment instead of providing her with the instruction that would develop her skills. The SST members seemed to focus on the institution's definition of "achievement" rather than considering the learning and emotional needs of the student. The team members worked hard to develop a solution to help Courtney graduate. However, although institutional "achievement" may prevail, it could be at the detriment of Courtney's long-term learning and emotional needs. They wanted to ensure that she received her diploma; however, the team did not discuss any specifics related to teaching Courtney needed skills or related to addressing her mental health needs.

Participants at each school demonstrated an understanding that systemic inequities persisted in their schools. Although personnel at each school took initial steps to implement practices to support students, there were still opportunities for individuals to enact action to address existing inequities. At South, professional development opportunities were offered to discuss the impact of race in schools. However, these provided opportunities were not required for all staff to attend, suggesting it was not a top priority. Additionally, individual teacher responses were used to support the needs of students because there was not a systemic process in place to provide equitable opportunities for all students. At Northeast, conversations focused on

credit attainment in place of developing strategies to support the individual needs of the students.

Summary of Findings

South and Northeast were each high schools identified as demonstrating high levels of "achievement" for students with disability labels. South was selected based on the criterion of test-score data included in state report cards that reflect similar results when disaggregated across groups defined by race or ability. Northeast High School was identified by community organizations for exhibiting a high level of student "achievement" by students with disability labels. After conducting observations and interviews with teachers and school leaders at each high school, three themes emerged: 1) a foundational set of beliefs; 2) a process to develop teacher and student supports; and 3) taking steps toward equitable access to education?

Participants related a set of foundational beliefs and understandings. At each school, faculty members shared a belief that all students are the responsibility of all teachers. The second belief that was identified was that all students can achieve. Data from participants indicated that they view "achievement" in varying ways - some that support student individuality; and some that support the goals of the school, what I called institutional "achievement." Although personal definitions of "achievement" varied from the institution's definitions, there was an understanding that all students can be successful, and it was the responsibility of the faculty to support the students. The final shared belief was the importance or building relationships with students and families. Participants shared that building relationships was an integral component to ensure students found success.

The second theme identified was that each school developed processes to support teachers and their students. The structures put in place to support teachers included supportive

administrators, time provided for collaboration, and relevant professional development. The structures that were put in place to support students included access to school-wide resources, the implementation of a service delivery model that promoted instruction in the general education environment and supports to address mental health concerns.

The final theme that was identified was taking steps toward equitable access to education. Participants at each school recognized an understanding that the school system was designed to uphold norms of White supremacy culture and had innate biases built into the school structure. Additionally, school members also demonstrated an awareness that students with disability labels often had different experiences than their peers without disability labels. Finally, the participants demonstrated an awareness of the inequities that exist in the school system; however, there were instances where school personnel did not enact systemic action. School members at each high school have worked to remove inequities within the school system; however, more work needs to be done to continue striving for an equitable education for all students.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how school leaders and educators at schools identified as demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" for students with disability labels perceived "achievement." Additionally, this study investigated the methods school personnel used to identify and address barriers to providing students with disability labels access to equitable learning opportunities. The study was based on the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders and educators at schools selected for this study perceive "achievement"?
2. What do school leaders and educators view as challenges to student "achievement"?
3. How do school leaders and educators enable and create continuous equitable access to opportunities for students with disability labels?
4. How are school leaders and educators supported in this work?

In this chapter, I will begin by summarizing conclusions drawn from my analysis of observations and interviews of the participants at both high schools. Next, I will share the implications based on the findings of this study. After sharing my recommendations, I will identify the limitations of this study. Next, I will provide recommendations for future research. Finally, I will provide a summary of the conclusions and implications of this study.

Belief that All Students Can Achieve

Both schools had personnel that had a foundational belief that all students could achieve. This perspective that all students could achieve demonstrates that the participants shared an assets-based ideology (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Hattie, 2011; Moll et al., 2005). Believing that all students can achieve was one of the beliefs that drove the practices being implemented at

each school. This practice aligns with previous research that found personal beliefs of school members are the driving force of their teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Matthews, 2020; Spiess & Cooper, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, school members communicated it was the responsibility of the faculty to adjust current practices to meet the needs of the students if they were not being successful. This belief aligns with the social model of disability meaning that the challenges a student may face in school are the result of environmental limitations and not due to any deficits within the student (Baglieri et al., 2011). Since the participants believed, to some degree, that the environment created barriers that impeded student "achievement", the school members talked about implementing mechanisms to make changes in their building.

In this study, data from participants indicated that they view "achievement" in different ways. They had their own viewpoints of "achievement", what I called personal definitions of "achievement", and they shared a perspective that supported the goals of the school, what I called institutional "achievement." The institutional definition focused on academic outcomes based on standardized test scores, which tends to disadvantage students of color and students with disability labels (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Childers, 2020; Kotok, 2017). At both schools, the institutional viewpoint of "achievement" aligned with the traditional definition often found in the literature and focused on academic outcomes of standardized assessments, student grades, and credit attainment. For example, Kora, the Transition Coordinator at South, explained that the institutional viewpoint of "achievement" has "always been academics, it's always academics, always academics." James, an Associate Principal, explained that "[Northeast], historically... has leaned towards very traditional academics as measures of success."

Although the institutional viewpoint of “achievement” emphasized academic outcomes, the participants understood that the use of standardized scores to measure “achievement” disadvantaged groups of students. Furthermore, they acknowledged that measures of academic outcomes did not capture the “achievement” of students. School members also viewed “achievement” as personal growth and making progress towards the individual goals of students. For example, Mandi, a Special Education teacher at South, shared that “achievement” is “making a post high school plan and... moving towards that goal.” Additionally, Marybeth, a School Counselor at Northeast, explained that her personal definition of “achievement” would be students developing “the skills to be responsible, to be respectful, to be safe in the community, to go out and interview for a job, to go out and go to college, and have social success.”

However, when working to provide support for students the institutional definition of “achievement” prevailed. For example, the discussion around supporting Courtney’s return from a treatment facility was initially introduced from Marybeth’s perspective of “achievement” regarding the skills that Courtney needed to develop. However, as discussions continued during the SST meeting, the focus shifted towards whether teachers could be convinced to allow her to complete summative projects to enable her to earn credit and thus her diploma. The team members did not discuss how to support Courtney with her mental health needs or work to develop a plan to teach her the skills that Marybeth initially brought forth as a concern.

This tension was noted throughout the study. For example, when John was struggling with Spanish 1 during virtual learning, the focus was to find a solution towards earning credit. There appeared to be more of a concern on having John be on track for earning credit

towards receiving a diploma rather than addressing the underlying issues that caused John to struggle in the first place as he progressed towards higher-level Spanish courses. This shows that the institutional definition of "achievement" seemed to supersede the needs of the student or any individual's personal definition.

Understanding Racial Inequities

Swanson and Welton (2019) defined a person to be race conscious "if they are able to readily identify the problems associated with racism and are willing to participate in critical discussions about race." Additionally, Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) wrote that "addressing issues of race in schooling, school leaders' heightened awareness of institutional racism is important in order to effectively create a school climate of openness and intellectual rigor and develop strategies for closing the achievement gap." The first step to remove racist practices in schools is to be aware that inequities exist and that they serve the function of benefitting the students that resemble those in power (Picower, 2009; Shelton & Barnes, 2016).

School members at both schools were aware that race-based disparities existed. Furthermore, they noted that schools were built with a White norm that placed students of color at a disadvantage. For example, Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator at South, explained that Black males with an EBD label face the most challenges in school because "there is [an] inherent bias that exists in education, that exists among our teachers... Our teaching staff is a largely White staff." Similar to the race consciousness demonstrated at South, James, an Associate Principal at Northeast, stated, "our entire school system is built for White affluent people to be successful, and if you're not that normative coming in, there's gonna be systemic roadblocks to becoming successful." However, neither school transitioned their race consciousness into systemic action, which will be discussed in the implications section below.

Although neither school took significant steps towards addressing racial inequities, there were steps taken to address the needs of some students. School members at South High School implemented individual teacher responses to address the needs of students. At Northeast, school personnel developed a schoolwide systemic support structure.

Individual Teacher Response at South High School

Sethi and Scales (2020) noted students feel a greater level of connectedness to their school when they sensed that teachers cared about their academic success. School personnel at South communicated a strong commitment to building relationships and meeting regularly with students. For example, Kora explained that school personnel "engag[e] in getting to know our students and our families." Both teachers and administrators at South committed a lot of time to foster relationships with the students to help them find success. However, since South relied on the individual responses of teachers to assist students, many supports were often put in place after a student already started to fail multiple classes.

Claire, a Special Education teacher, shared an example when she received an email from a student on her caseload, "I got an email from a student... [It said something like,] 'This semester has gotten off to a terrible start. I'm really struggling... I'm failing a lot of classes.'" Claire responded by developing a plan with the student to start meeting at least once a week until the student was passing their classes. Not only was the burden placed on the student to reach out for assistance, but the lack of a structured schoolwide support system resulted in the student falling behind in several classes before support was provided.

School leaders have a key role in improving academic "achievement" through recognizing and understanding the barriers affecting student progress (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018). School members at South provided an individual teacher response to support students. For

example, school members implemented an ACP period and the S.A.W. for students to obtain support if they are struggling in their classes. However, these support structures were only available to some students. For example, if a student did not have a study hall in their school schedule, they would be unable to receive assistance in the writing center. Additionally, some students are unable to obtain support after school due to other commitments or transportation issues. Furthermore, students must be knowledgeable of the institutional and cultural processes to navigate the support structures.

Students that are from a different culture than the one in power may have a challenging time navigating the institutional processes (Delpit, 1995; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Mwangi, 2019; Woodgate & Busolo, 2021). If students are not explicitly taught how to navigate the resources at South, then they will not have access to similar resources as their peers. Furthermore, the additional instruction that may be necessary for some students was offered outside the school day which may result in additional barriers preventing some students from accessing needed resources.

Co-Teaching Model at South High School

Nationwide, the majority of students with disability labels receive most of their instruction in the general education environment (NCES, 2019). Many schools have used a co-teaching model to provide support for students with disability labels in the general education environment (Friend et al., 2014; Murdock et al., 2016; Rangvid, 2018). Friend (2016) related that a benefit of co-teaching occurs when general and special educators work together to differentiate lessons to meet the needs of all students. At South, teachers were provided with time to collaborate with their colleagues. For example, Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator, stated that "teachers at [South]… have more prep time to plan together than I would say is

typical for [other district] high schools... The time is there. Utilizing it, it's more up to the teachers."

Teachers at South developed individual systems with their co-teachers to develop accommodations to help students be more successful in their classes. For example, Claire stated, "I just simply text with them too, brainstorm ideas 'cause it's just easier...I'll share [a] Google doc with them, 'This is a modified form, let me know if there's any standards the I accidentally took out by mistake.'" Since there was a lack of structured time to collaborate, co-teaching partners defaulted to sharing resources rather than collaborating to create differentiated lessons. Communicating with one another over text or Google docs has the potential to limit reflection or engage in more in-depth dialogue centered on current practices and the needs of the students. This lack of consistent collaboration signals that action needs to be taken to increase the impact of the co-teaching model on student learning.

Frattura and Capper (2016) argued that the use of co-teaching teams places the responsibility of serving students with disability labels on a few teachers instead of all school members. Additionally, Kusuma-Powell and Powell (2016) suggested that use of co-teaching builds the capacity to instruct a range of learners in only a few teachers rather than in all teachers. Since South implements a co-teaching model that only exists in math and English classes, many of the teachers are unable to collaborate with special education teachers to build their capacity to service students with disability labels.

Lidia, the Special Education Coordinator at South, explained that the IB curriculum is challenging. She related that many students struggle to manage the writing demands that are necessary to be successful in the upper grades. Additionally, she communicated that it was part of her role to work with special education teachers to help them meet the needs of their students.

Lidia explained, "My individual meetings with [special education] teachers are spent on student needs and teacher practices." Since Lidia only works with special education teachers to build their capacity to help students access the curriculum, students who are not in co-taught classes do not have access to many of the resources of those in classes that include a special education teacher.

Faculty members at South High School valued building relationships with students and families to develop a better understanding of the needs of students. Teachers used this understanding of students to respond to their needs when they faced challenges. Instead of having a systemic support structure in place, individual teachers developed plans with students to provide additional support. For example, teachers would develop plans with students to attend the writing center or S.A.W. However, the burden was often placed on the student to reach out for assistance or obtain additional support after school. Co-teaching was implemented to support students with disability labels in their English and math classes. Although this benefitted students in these classes, it left many students without support to access the curriculum in their classes that were not co-taught.

Schoolwide Systemic Support at Northeast

School personnel have a role in reflecting on whether current structures in place are supporting the "achievement" of all students and must be willing to make changes to the system if it is not working for all (Cavendish et al., 2017; Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Milner, 2017). At Northeast, Amelia, the Director of Student Services, worked to implement a culture of all school members being responsible for the "achievement" of all students. The mechanism to initiate the culture change was the implementation of ICS.

School members implemented several teams to analyze and reflect upon the systems in place and monitor whether students were being successful. At a classroom level, the PLC teams worked to analyze the curriculum and delivery of lessons to gauge whether all students could access the curriculum. At a schoolwide level, SST meetings were used to monitor student data and determine if additional supports were needed to help students find greater success. For example, James, an Associate Principal, explained the work of the SST:

> Every 15 days, we run data... We noticed some patterns with some teams of teachers where students were not being successful. So, with that, kinda looked at what are the different supports we have to...provide the adults. 'Cause what we're trying to do, is also flip to the philosophy that we're not trying to fix kids, we're trying to fix the system. We're owning when students are not successful.

DeMatthews (2015) noted that school leaders can use data to promote change within the school system. School leaders at Northeast used schoolwide data to identify areas that needed to be addressed and to determine if any changes benefited students.

Sailor (2015) suggested that teams should be provided with a framework to help facilitate and guide discussions centered on student needs. School personnel at Northeast provided uniformed agenda templates that were required at every PLC and SST meeting. The agendas were used to document discussions and hold educators accountable for the action steps assigned to team members.

School personnel implemented several schoolwide resources to support students with their learning prior to failing a class. For example, every student at Northeast is enrolled in an enrichment period where they have the option to receive assistance from a teacher. To help students understand the process to seek out resources, every student is required to enroll in a

class called LEAD. During this course, students are taught about the resources that are available along with the processes to access the resources. For example, students would be taught the process to sign up with a teacher during the enrichment period to receive assistance.

ICS Service Delivery Model at Northeast High School

Unlike South, Northeast implemented the ICS service delivery model which promoted the use of co-serving students rather than simply creating co-teaching partnerships. Capper and Frattura (2009) defined co-serving teams as grade level teams that consist of general educators, special education teachers, interventionists, student services staff, ESL teachers, and other school personnel collaborating to develop curriculum that meets the needs of all students. At Northeast, the co-serving teams worked together as a PLC every week to reflect on previous lessons as well as develop teaching practices to help students be successful with upcoming lessons. For example, James, an Associate Principal, explained the importance of having educators with varying expertise collaborate during a PLC:

> Its [the] regular education teacher bringing that content knowledge, that instructional approach, and knowing where kids are going to struggle. I think it's a special education teacher, or a student support teacher, or other specialists talking about what strategies, or what tools, or what scaffolds, can be implemented on the front end, so that all students can access and be successful.

The PLC co-serving team provided a mechanism to have school members with different perspectives discuss and create lessons. Having different perspectives involved when developing lessons provides an opportunity to consider the needs of a greater range of students.

Not only do co-serving teams bring together a range of perspectives, but it also provides a mechanism to increase the capacity of all teachers to work with diverse learners (Capper &

Frattura, 2009; Kurth et al., 2015; Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2016). At Northeast, it was noted that all teachers have access to the resources developed during their PLC meeting even if they did not work directly with a co-teacher. For example, during an English PLC meeting, a special education teacher shared a graphic organizer they developed to help students target key words in the book they were currently reading. The special education teacher shared the graphic organizer with the two English teachers that did not have a co-teacher so they could provide the resource in their classes.

Northeast implemented schoolwide systemic support structures to address the needs of their students and to build capacity in their teachers. School members developed a PLC for the classroom level and an SST for the schoolwide level. PLCs reflected on prior teaching practices and collaborated to develop lessons that met the needs of their students. The SST addressed the individual needs of students when they were struggling to find success in school. However, the team overlooked student needs in favor of institutional "achievement."

Implications

In this section I will provide implications for high school practices informed by the findings of this study. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that schools implement the following actions: a) Engage in conversations to identify and address institutional racism, b) foster teacher empowerment to create change; c) conduct an equity audit; d) partner with community organizations; e) invite families into the conversation; f) mandate pre-service preparation programs to include racial equity; g) mandate racial equity PD; h) use racial equity process when making policy decisions and i) restructure the state report card.

Engage in Conversations to Identify and Address Institutional Racism

Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) argued that "achievement" cannot be reached by focusing on academics alone. For students of color to "achieve," school leaders must be willing to foster conversations with faculty members to identify and address racial discrimination, biases, and other forms of institutional racism within the school curriculum and structures. Participants at both schools shared that students of color experience the most challenges within the school system. However, school members spent little to no time investigating how the current structures may contribute to the institutional racism of the school. For example, when Mitchell, a School Counselor, said that students of color are less likely to ask school members for help than White students, school members did not interrogate the current system to understand what systemic practices contributed to students of color not seeking assistance. Additionally, the support teams implemented through ICS had a sole focus on academics and lacked a framework to reflect on the racial impact of their current practices.

Leonardo and Broderick (2011) wrote that "…racial supremacy is taught to White students and students of color, it is pedagogical. Insofar as it is pedagogical, there is the possibility of critically reflecting on its manifestations in order to disrupt them" (p. 2214). It is critical for educators to reflect on the current practices being implemented to dismantle structures that contribute to the institutional racism of the school. Love (2019) wrote "Abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, [and] new ways to be inclusive…" (p. 88). School leaders cannot enact schoolwide changes if they do not understand what changes need to be made to benefit students of color and students with disability labels. School leaders need to seek

out new perspectives to better understand the systemic changes that are required to meet the needs of all students especially those with multiple identities. For example, understanding the needs of students of color that also have a disability label. I recommend that school leaders should hold conversations with students of color, families of color, students with disability labels and families of students with disability labels to learn what changes would improve the learning environment for all students. Additionally, school leaders should facilitate conversations with families of color that have students with disability labels, faculty members, and community organizations to identify and eliminate the current teaching practices that perpetuate institutional racism and ableism.

Foster Teacher Empowerment to Create Change

School personnel at Northeast High School constructed teams consisting of various faculty members to identify and address barriers to student "achievement." During these weekly meetings, team members often mentioned systemic barriers that prevented some students from achieving. When these barriers were identified, team members responded in frustration and asked members to bring the issues to the District Leadership Team. Milner (2017) recommended that school personnel identify barriers and then address them to prevent students from slipping through the cracks. Northeast developed teams at the classroom and school level; however, there was not a process to collaborate with district leaders to enact schoolwide changes. I recommend that school leaders should develop a streamlined process where school-based teams work with leadership teams to make changes.

Conduct an Equity Audit

Frattura and Capper (2016) defined an equity audit as a complete analysis of every aspect of the school district from the mission statement to more specific pieces such as student

programming, district data, and allocation of district staff. Conducting an equity audit is a useful process to identify the institutional practices in place that are discriminatory towards certain groups of students to better understand what aspects of the school system need to be changed (Palmer et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). For example, school leaders should analyze schoolwide data to understand the composition of the students that attend the school, status of labeling students, discipline data, “achievement” data, and the composition of students enrolled in classes (Capper & Frattura, 2016; Theoharis et al., 2020).

Personnel at both schools demonstrated a commitment to addressing inequities once they were identified. However, an analysis of my findings showed that inequitable structures still existed at both schools. Additionally, it seemed that school members were aware of differences by race but not actions were taken. For example, participants at South did not communicate a need to address the lack of differentiation that was occurring in some classes. I recommend that schools conduct an equity audit to help school leaders and educators identify aspects of their school system that need to be corrected to provide equitable opportunities for all students.

Partner with Community Organizations

Partnering with local organizations can help to promote sustained academic growth by sharing financial burdens and obtaining additional resources (Beck & Wikoff, 2019; Bryk et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2020). Both Northeast and South worked to partner with community organizations; however, the scope of their partnerships was limited. For example, Northeast emphasized a standard that students should strive to attend the flagship university. Additionally, they partnered with an agency that had a financial barrier preventing access to some students. At South, the College and Career Center invited members of the flagship university to come in to work with families. Scott et al. (2020) suggested that school members partner with community

organizations that share common goals and an assets-based viewpoint of students. I recommend that school personnel should integrate their school with organizations and community members to foster a robust connection to achieve similar goals. School members should engage with the community to provide a range of supports and opportunities such as internships, job shadowing, mental health services, childcare services, and career counseling.

Invite Families into the Conversation

Participants at both schools shared a foundational belief that it is important to build relationships with students and families to increase student "achievement." Participants at both schools were comprised of a majority White faculty yet communicated that Black students were less successful than their White peers. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2015) communicated that many educators explain the existence of a race-based "achievement" gap with a deficit-based viewpoint that some students are not motivated to do well in school. They suggest that school members should engage in conversations with families to develop a strength-based framework to understand students that have a different culture than those in a position of power. Kressler et al. (2020) wrote that school members should engage in conversations with students to provide them a voice in their learning experiences and empower families to help teachers understand how their child learns best. Ball et al. (2021) wrote that there is a "longstanding power imbalance that exists between marginalized and oppressed families and school systems" (p. 1202). They suggested that school leaders should implement a strength-based family engagement framework to develop trust and rapport with families to build a stronger school-family partnership. Based on the cultural mismatch between the predominantly White teachers at both schools in this study and students of color, I recommend that school leaders implement a family engagement framework to elicit a stronger partnership with families.

Empowering families in the decision-making process will help to ensure the needs of students are being met.

Mandate Preservice Preparation Programs to Include Racial Equity

Participants at both schools recognized that racial disparities existed at their school. Additionally, they communicated that there was a desire to address some of the existing racial disparities, but there was a lack of understanding on how to engage students of all racial groups. Jupp et al. (2019) wrote that when White teachers are first learning about White privilege and systemic racism, they often respond with silence, resistance, and colorblind dialogue. It is imperative to begin instructing pre-service teachers on how to examine school structures and question how they impact all students. Sleeter (2017) suggested that pre-service programs should include a combination of coursework and fieldwork to better understand how to address racial equity in schools.

Pre-service programs should provide field experience that allows preservice teachers to visit communities that are different from their own. The coursework should provide culturally responsive teaching strategies and time for preservice teachers to reflect on key concepts and connect them to their own experiences and beliefs (Jupp et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2008). I recommend that preservice preparation programs include racial equity content to help future teachers better understand White privilege and how systemic racism impacts students in schools.

Mandate Racial Equity PD

To combat racist practices in schools, it is critical for educators to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy and implement antiracist practices (Love, 2019; Shelton & Barnes, 2016; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Participants at both schools showed an awareness that racial

disparities existed; however, it appeared that school personnel did not always fully understand the causes of the differences. For example, Mitchell noticed that students of color are less willing to ask teachers for help; however, he did not communicate a deeper understanding of the reasons a student may not seek assistance. Matias and Mackey (2015) argued that since much of the teaching force is White, it is vital to provide teachers with PD that includes racial equity. To combat racial resistance, they suggested that a PD framework should be implemented to teachers that include concrete pedagogical strategies. For example, multiple forms of media should be analyzed to better understand the multidimensional nature of race. Additionally, teachers should be exposed to counter stories that were not reinterpreted by the dominant culture to "reflect on the systemic consequences of racism" (Matias & Mackey, 2015, p. 41).

McManimon and Casey (2018) wrote that PD must force teachers to more than just reflect on how White supremacy impacts the life of students in schools. They suggest that equity PD should "not just [be] about understanding, but also about action..." (McManimon & Casey, 2018, p. 400). DPI (2015) suggested that equity PD should include understanding implicit bias and how it impacts teaching practices. PD should help educators analyze current practices in place at their school and theorize how those practices impact students. Love (2019) argued that teachers need to be held accountable to develop pedagogy that challenges Whiteness and injustices in their schools.

At each school, addressing student equity did not appear to be a current priority. At South, equity and racial PD was voluntary and did not include immediate action steps. At Northeast, the equity initiative was put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic and had only started creating a committee to analyze faculty needs. I recommend that schools implement

mandatory racial equity PD that aligns with an action plan to address current inequitable structures.

Use Racial Equity Process when Making Policy Decisions

At times, faculty at both schools made school-based decisions without including a discussion on racial equity. The Great Lakes Equity Center (2018) recommends that school personnel implement an equity-based framework when making decisions to have an integrated school. An equity-based framework has three foundational components: 1) Inclusive, Co-constructive Planning; 2) School-based Supports; and 3) Outcome Measures.

Inclusive, Co-constructive planning is premised on including key stakeholders in the decision-making process. For example, school leaders should seek input from students, teachers, principals, families, community organizations, government officials, and university researchers. Incorporating a range of perspectives will help to identify barriers to student learning and work to develop solutions. The second component, School-based Supports, focuses on the supports that are needed to improve a student's experience. The framework outlines the need to have an inclusive school culture, culturally competent educators, culturally relevant curriculum, access to extracurricular opportunities, and family engagement. The final component, Outcome Measures, emphasizes a need to shift away from solely relying on academics to measure success. The framework suggests that outcome measures should be based on the following: a) integrated schooling; b) equitable opportunities; c) improved social climate; and d) student success.

Given that both schools often defaulted to using the institutional definition of "achievement" when making decisions, I recommend that school leaders use an equity-based framework during the decision-making process. Using a framework will help include the voices

of all stakeholders in the development of school decisions. Additionally, the framework will help school leaders consider student equity and the needs of the students when addressing the school system.

Restructure the State Report Card

The current metrics used on the state report card to determine if a school is serving its students emphasize academic outcomes (DPI, 2019). More specifically, the state report card has a narrow measurement of "achievement" that emphasizes students earning credits and academic performance on standardized tests (DPI, 2019). Provided that the literature has identified the intrinsic bias that exists within standardized assessments (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Kotok, 2017; Mintrop & Zane, 2017), I recommend that the measures used to determine accountability should be altered. In addition to outcomes of standardized assessments, the state report should include a strand assessing schools on the level of supports offered at a school along with the level of impact that the support has on the students. Additionally, I recommend that the report card should be changed so "White students" are no longer the comparison norm. Finally, I recommend that a strand should be included to incorporate parent feedback towards the level of support offered at the school.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations identified during this study. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, all the interviews and observations were conducted virtually using Google Meets or Zoom. As a result of conducting virtual observations, I was unable to enter the high schools to observe whether participants were referencing materials or taking notes during the SST meetings. Additionally, not all participants were visible during the

Zoom meeting making it more difficult to get a sense of any nonverbal communication that I could perhaps have investigated further with individuals.

A second limitation was that during snowball sampling there were school members who may have provided important information that were not willing to participate in this study because of COVID-19. I was informed that some school members were unable to participate because of the amount of time they had to commit transitioning to teaching virtually. Additionally, there were individuals at each school that were unable to participate due to being out of the school on family leave. Furthermore, the participants at South High School who volunteered to participate in this study were only members of the Special Education department. I reached out to a greater variety of faculty; however, only members of the Special Education department agreed to be a part of this study.

A third limitation of this study was a lack of opportunity to follow-up with every participant. At Northeast, there was turnover on the administrative team that resulted in some participants leaving and others taking on new roles which limited their ability to commit additional time to this study. After the departure of two administrators, a couple of the participants were forced to cover multiple roles at the high school which impacted their availability.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to explore how school leaders and educators at schools perceived "achievement" and worked to provide equitable learning opportunities to students with disability labels. Absent from this study were the perspectives of the students and their families along with the effectiveness of the school supports. I recommend that future research examine the

following: a) student and family perspective; b) methods to measure effectiveness of support structures; and c) continuous review process.

Student and Family Perspective

Personnel at both schools acknowledged that the teaching staff was predominantly White. Furthermore, they noted that the school system was built to affirm characteristics of White supremacy culture outlined by Tatum (2021). Research should investigate how students and families perceive "achievement" and understand how it compares to the perspectives of school personnel. At Northeast, Mitchell, shared that the student services department does not always do an excellent job at aligning classes with student goals or interests. Future research could work to better understand the perspectives of families of color to determine how to facilitate increased engagement with schooling.

Methods to Measure Effectiveness of Support Structures

This study explored the supports in place at South and Northeast; however, methods to measure the effectiveness of these supports were not examined. Future research can seek to determine how to measure whether school supports are benefiting students. Developing a measure to determine effectiveness of a support can help co-serving teams determine whether current structures should continue or be changed to better support students.

At both schools, students were identified for needing additional support if they were failing a class. It seemed that school members would continue to suggest supports until a student was passing all their classes. Since several supports occurred at the same time, it is hard to understand the impact of specific school-based supports on student learning. Future research should investigate the impact that supports have on student learning. Understanding the supports

that have the greatest impact on student learning, can help schools implement the support for all students to help students be successful instead of providing supports after a student has already start to struggle in school.

Continuous Review of Process

This study examined the structures in place to support students with “achievement.” However, future research could strive to understand the process school personnel implement to ensure that the system is still meeting the needs of all students. For example, future researchers could investigate the process in place when there is faculty turnover to engage new school members with the goals of the school. Additionally, future researchers can work to understand the processes in place to re-engage faculty buy-in throughout the years.

Summary

Participants from both schools demonstrated an awareness that disparities existed between groups of students. The school members held a foundational set of beliefs that drove their commitment to develop structures to help students have equitable access to learning opportunities. Data from the participants indicated a personal viewpoint of “achievement” that included measures of students progressing towards their individual goals and understanding how to access resources within their school and community and an institutional viewpoint of “achievement” that was determined by traditional academic measures such as standardized assessments and student grades. Although school members believed all students could achieve, the institutional academic definition of “achievement” drove the process to provide support to students.

Northeast and South both worked to address the inequities that existed at their schools. However, the decisions made by school leaders and educators at each school determined the

level of support that was implemented to address student needs. South implemented support that was centered on individual teacher responses whereas Northeast developed a schoolwide system to support students. However, both schools developed supports that helped students meet the institutional indicators of “achievement.” Discussions on supporting students often focused on academic outcomes and credit attainment rather than adjusting schoolwide structures and developing individual skills that students needed to meet their goals.

The school members at both schools demonstrated a willingness to engage in the initial step of providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. School members acknowledged that inequities existed and that there was a need to make changes to the current system. South began to engage in step two by having a culture of individual teacher responses to address the needs of students; however, this method is not sustainable and was only implemented when students struggled or sought out assistance on their own. Personnel at Northeast engaged in step two by developing systemic support at the classroom and building levels. However, the needs of students were not always addressed.

School members can push back against the dominant, societal viewpoints that uphold a narrow definition of “achievement” by addressing the learning and emotional needs of individual students instead of solely emphasizing achieving the institutional viewpoint of “achievement.” The goal for school personnel should be to uphold structures that ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. Additionally, school members should strive to have all students graduate with a diploma; however, credit attainment and earning a diploma should occur after providing students with the support to develop their skills to allow them to achieve their future goals.

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APPENDIX A: Participant Questionnaire

Participant Name: ____

1.What is your current position at your school?

2.What previous positions have you held throughout your career in education?

3. How long have you worked in the field of education? How long have you been employed in your current position?

4. What education licensures do you currently have or had previously?

5. Discuss any committees or projects you have been a part of at the district or school level.

6. What school-wide teams to you participate in or coordinate policies/programs for?

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol for school leaders and educators

Interview Protocol

(Interview prior to observation)

Interview Description: I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with school leaders and educators who work directly with designing supports for students with disability labels. The questions below will serve as a general outline for the questions I will be asking my participants. I will be asking follow-up questions and clarification questions depending on the responses I receive from my participants. I will begin the interview by asking the participants how they are doing, and I will ask the participant to tell me about their background. I will explain the purpose of my study and then I will begin the interview protocol.

Questions:

1) Please walk me through how you view your role as a school leader. How do you view your role as it relates to students with disability labels?
2) Please share an example of what a successful student may look like.
3) Describe factors that you believe could limit the success of students with disability labels. Walk me through the process once they are identified.
4) Walk me through the process you use to determine whether your current structure is benefiting students with disability labels.
5) How often does a school team meet to discuss the progress of students with disability labels? Please walk me through a typical meeting.
6) Tell me about a time you worked with a struggling student.
7) Please walk me through an example when you helped a student find success.
8) Please walk me through the roles of the general education teacher as it pertains to students in special education. Walk me through the roles of the special education teacher.
9) Please share an example of a time when a teacher approached administration to share that they were struggling to meet the needs of a student in their class.
10) What is the role of race in achievement? Please walk me through the referral process for special education services.

APPENDIX C: Snowball Sampling Email

Dear ________________________________,

My name is Kyle Resch, and I am currently in a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am developing a dissertation study to better understand how schools create equitable access to opportunities for students with disabilities. This could be in the school or in the community.

As an organization active in the community, I am reaching out to ask if you can identify any high schools that exhibit a high level of student achievement for students, specifically students with disability labels.

I appreciate your time and consideration. If you are familiar with any high schools that fit this criterion, please email me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Kyle Resch

APPENDIX D: Observation Protocol for Data Planning Meetings

Interview Protocol

Date: ____________________ Location: _________________ Time: ________________

Environment:
Setup:
Participants:
Items to Consider: • Using student-focused language • Discussing current school structures • Asset-based vs. Deficit-based lens • Focus on learning environment • Perspectives on ableism • Types of student data • Systems to support educators • Perceptions of achievement • Perceptions of barriers to achievement • Output vs. input (systems and results) • Personal reflections • Discussions on race/referral process

Individual A	**Individual B**	**Individual C**
12:55p **1:05p** **1:15p** **1:25p** **1:35p** **1:45p**		

CURRICULUM VITAE

KYLE WILLIAM RESCH

EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Milwaukee, WI
Doctor of Urban Education December 2021

- Specialization: Exceptional Education
- Dissertation: Working Toward "Achievement": Key Considerations for Providing Equitable Opportunities to Students with Disability Labels.
- Awards: Dean's List

Cardinal Stritch University Milwaukee, WI
Master of Arts August 2010

- Specialization: Urban Special Education
- Thesis: The Effects of Using a Structured Reading Intervention to Increase Decoding and Fluency.
- Awards: Dean's List

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Oshkosh, WI
Bachelor of Science December 2007

- Major: Psychology
- Awards: Dean's List

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Oak Creek-Franklin Joint School District Oak Creek, WI
Special Education Teacher March 2015 – present

- Delivered effective and differentiated classroom instruction to a range of students.
- Modified general education curriculum for students with disability labels using various instructional techniques and technologies.
- Redirected students using Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS).
- Taught students across multiple classifications and degrees of special needs.
- Led activities that developed students' physical, emotional, and social growth.
- Created and managed IEPs to define student learning objectives and educational strategies, in addition to applying instructional knowledge and methods to support goals.
- Cultivated connections and strong student rapport to foster classroom engagement, in addition to recording student progress to inform parents and school administration.
- Took a lead role to assist with the restructuring of the Special Education programming at the high school level.

Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District Middleton, WI
Special Education Teacher August 2011 - March 2015

- Modified general education curriculum for students with disability labels using various instructional techniques and technologies.
- Collaborated with general education teachers to improve curriculum to meet the needs of a range of students.
- Cultivated connections and strong student rapport to foster classroom engagement, in addition to recording student progress to inform parents and school administration.
- Fostered communication with parents of students on my caseload.
- Created and managed IEPs to define student learning objectives and educational strategies, in addition to applying instructional knowledge and methods to support goals.
- Provided professional development to colleagues in differentiation.
- Partnered with general education teachers from across academic departments.
- Substituted as a school administrator.

Milwaukee Public School District Milwaukee, WI
Special Education Teacher August 2008 - July 2011

- Delivered effective and differentiated classroom instruction to a range of students.
- Assisted struggling students to maintain progress levels by designing individualized lesson plans focused on areas for improvement.
- Led activities that developed students' physical, emotional, and social growth.
- Taught reading, language arts and social sciences in a self-contained ID classroom.
- Instructed students with physical and intellectual disabilities.
- Organized instruction material constructed bulletin boards and set up work areas.
- Cultivated connections and strong student rapport to foster classroom engagement, in addition to recording student progress to inform parents and school administration.
- Implemented and taught life skills program, enabling students to master such tasks as checkbook balancing and laundry.
- Worked with students with moderate to severe autism to increase life skills.
- Taught multiple subjects to students with intellectual or emotional disabilities.
- Coordinated special education students and teacher assistant schedules with master schedule.
- Created and managed IEPs to define student learning objectives and educational strategies to support goals.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Milwaukee, WI
Doctoral Student April 2019 - December 2021

- Identified a research problem in the field of providing equitable learning opportunities to high school students with disability labels, developed a methodology, and successfully completed the study within the expected timeline with a high degree of independence.
- Executed a qualitative study implementing semi-structured interviews and observations.
- Completed data analysis incorporating NVivo software.
- Selected to present the findings of this study at the TED conference.

Cardinal Stritch University Milwaukee, WI
Graduate Student September 2008 - August 2010

- Developed a novel literacy intervention program to study an approach to increase the reading fluency and the decoding skills of a high school student with an intellectual disability label.

- Analyzed the effectiveness of the literacy intervention program using the Qualitative Reading Inventory IV.
- Presented the findings of this study to the graduate school committee.

PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES

Presenter

Resch, K. W. (2021, November). *Working Toward "Achievement": Key Considerations for Providing Access to Equitable Opportunities to Students with Disability Labels*. Presentation at Teacher Education Division Conference, Fort Worth, TX.

SKILLS

- Student records management
- Conflict resolution techniques
- Classroom management
- Middle school education
- Differentiated instruction
- Secondary education
- Trained in CPI
- Group and individual instruction
- Lesson Planning
- Special education
- Culturally responsive teaching
- Organizational Skills
- Knowledge of Microsoft Office, google
- Ability to work under pressure
- Leadership skills
- Conflict resolution
- Solution-oriented
- Knowledge of Infinite Campus, Oasys, STAR, FastBridge
- Verbal and written communication
- Teamwork

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Milwaukee, WI
Co-Teacher *Undergraduate Course for Math/Science Teacher Certification* January 2016 - May 2016

- Assisted with the planning and implementation of lessons for an undergraduate course focused on differentiation for math and science teachers.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Council for Exceptional Children *2017-present*
Graduate Student Member