Understanding the Unique Role of the Special Education Teacher and the Essence of the Special Education Teacher's Life in the Inclusive Setting

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UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER AND THE ESSENCE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER’S LIFE IN THE INCLUSIVE SETTING

by

Evelyn C. Phillips

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
Special Education and Literacy Studies
Western Michigan University
August 2021

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The drive for inclusive practices has required the special education teacher to become an integral part of the general education setting. Yet as the nation recovers from the ubiquitous COVID-19 virus, many schools are challenged to provide a learning environment that is conducive to all students while balancing the need to provide safety and an appropriate education. As schools find their way to a new normal, this study examines the unique role of the special education teacher engaged in inclusive practices. Using a phenomenological approach combined with the constant comparative method, this study explores what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function. The purpose is three-fold: to depict the essence of the experience of using inclusive practices, to deliver an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent while providing opportunities for inclusion, and to convey a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special education teacher during a global pandemic.
DEDICATION

To Daisy Louise, my Mum
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Luchara Wallace and Dr. Jeanine Mattson-Gearhart, who recognized the potential in me long before I was aware. Thank you for providing the space and safety to grow and make mistakes. Thank you for your ever-present support and for instilling in me the confidence to strive for my best.

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Deepest gratitude to Don, my husband, for your love and support. As always, you were there. Thank you.

And finally, to the One who encompasses all—Father God. To Him be the glory.

Evelyn C. Phillips
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................... ii

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... xi

LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... xii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1

   Statement of the Research Problem ........................................................................... 2

   Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................. 4

   Research Questions .................................................................................................. 5

   Significance of the Study ......................................................................................... 6

   Dissertation Structure ............................................................................................. 7

   Definitions of Terms ............................................................................................... 7

   Summary .................................................................................................................. 13

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 14

   Special Education Categories .................................................................................. 14

   Laws and Regulations Pertaining to Special Education ........................................... 15

   Interpretations of LRE ............................................................................................. 18

      The General Education Initiative ....................................................................... 18

      The Inclusion Movement ..................................................................................... 19

   Inclusion Contextualized .......................................................................................... 19

   Inclusion – Setting the Standard ............................................................................ 22

   Tools of the Trade ................................................................................................... 24
## Table of Contents—Continued

### CHAPTER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Strategies</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence-Based Practices</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Teaching as a Means to Practice Inclusion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Time and Placement</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Players</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support as a Means to Practice Inclusion</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTSS at the State Level</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence of Districts using RTI and MTSS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Plans for MTSS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Guidance</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Teaching</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III. METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology Research</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance to Research</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality Statement</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Tool: Observations</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Tool: Interviews</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Tool: Documentation Review</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation Review</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Constant Comparative Method of Data Collection</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Planning: Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Selection of Study Participants</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Strategy and Numbers</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Recruitment</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure for the Constant Comparative Method of Data Analysis</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure for Phenomenology Data Analysis</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability and Validity of Study</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

School D..................................................................................................................82
School E..................................................................................................................83
Summary of Participant Demographics .................................................................85
School Locations...................................................................................................86
Findings...................................................................................................................87
Observations ..........................................................................................................87
Structural Description Summary of Observations and Comparative Analysis of Observations ..................................................................................................................96
Composite Descriptions of Interviews ..................................................................97
Research Question 1: Roles as Viewed as One’s Position on a Team of Educators .....................................................................................................................97
Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher ..............................................98
Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students .................................................................................................................................99
Research Question 1 Responsibilities and Duties as a High School Special Education Inclusion Teacher ..................................................................................103
Providing Academic Support ................................................................................104
Providing Teacher Support ....................................................................................106
Research Question 2 Roles ....................................................................................108
Teaching Students as Special Education Teacher ...............................................108
Sharing Knowledge .................................................................................................109
Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students .................................................................................................................................110
Research Question 2 Responsibilities and Duties .................................................111
## Table of Contents—Continued

### CHAPTER

Providing Teacher Support ................................................................. 111

Research Question 3 Roles ................................................................. 114

Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher ............................... 114

Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students ................................................................. 117

Research Question 4 Roles ................................................................. 118

Sharing Knowledge ................................................................. 119

Research Question 4 Responsibilities & Duties .................................. 120

Providing Academic Support ................................................................. 120

Providing Teacher Support ................................................................. 120

Managing IEP Caseload ........................................................................ 121

Research Question 5 Roles ................................................................. 121

Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher ................................ 122

Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students ........................................................................ 126

Sharing Knowledge ........................................................................ 128

Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic as Special Education Teachers Fulfill Their Role While Providing Inclusion ................................. 129

Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher ................................ 129

Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students ........................................................................ 129

Research Question 5 Responsibilities & Duties .................................. 130

Providing Academic Support ................................................................. 130
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic as Special Education Teachers Fulfill Their Responsibilities and Duties While Providing Inclusion........................................................................................................132

Managing IEP Caseload.................................................................................................132

Summary of Major Themes ..............................................................................................133

Major Themes: Roles, Responsibilities, & Duties ..........................................................134

Major Theme: Interactions ..............................................................................................134

Major Theme: Inclusive Practices ...................................................................................135

Major Theme: Unique Qualities .....................................................................................135

Major Theme: COVID-19 Crisis Adjustments ..............................................................136

Documentation Review ..................................................................................................137

Document Review on Academic Supports ....................................................................137

Document Review on COVID-19 Procedures ..................................................................139

Triangulation ...................................................................................................................143

Summary ..........................................................................................................................143

V. DISCUSSION ..............................................................................................................145

Research Questions .......................................................................................................145

Implication of Findings ..................................................................................................147

Research Question 1 .......................................................................................................147

Research Question 2 .......................................................................................................149

Research Question 3 .......................................................................................................151

Research Question 4 .......................................................................................................151

Research Question 5 .......................................................................................................152
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

- Implications for Practice ................................................................. 155
- Limitations ......................................................................................... 155
- Delimitations ..................................................................................... 156
- Future Studies ................................................................................... 156

REFERENCES ............................................................................................ 158

APPENDICES

A. Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval and Informed Consent ..................... 173
B. Special Education Director Email ........................................................................ 181
C. Special Education Teacher Email ........................................................................ 184
D. Observation Invitation Letter to Teacher .................................................................... 187
E. Sample Observation Checklist ............................................................................. 189
F. Interview Protocol ............................................................................................. 194
G. Interview Questions ............................................................................................ 196
H. Data Trustworthiness Letter .................................................................................. 202
I. Coding of Phenomenology Study .......................................................................... 204
J. Sample of Analytical Memoing ........................................................................... 206
K. Process and Color Coding With Analytical Memoing ............................................. 208
L. Sample of Process Coding With In Vivo Statement/Significant Statements ................. 210
M. Second Coding Leading to Themes ....................................................................... 212
N. Major Themes and Research Questions .................................................................. 214
O. Thematic Portrayal of the Experiences of Special Education High School Inclusion Teachers Linked to Research Questions ......................................................... 217
APPENDICES

P. Final Analysis Chart 30 April 2021 .................................................................226

Q. Contents of Michigan Safe Schools Road Map Document .............................230

R. Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................244
LIST OF TABLES

1. Sample of R-TFI Secondary-Level Edition Assessment Tier 1 .................................42
2. Sample of R-TFI Secondary-Level Edition Assessment Tiers 2 & 3 ..........................43
3. Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory Reading Screening Items for Secondary Schools. ....44
4. Recruitment Locale Descriptions ..............................................................................65
5. Location of School ......................................................................................................66
6. Participant Demographic Data Collection for Phenomenology Study on Understanding the Unique Role of the Special Education Teacher and the Essence of the Special Education Teacher’s Life in the Inclusive Settings ..............................................................................................................67
7. Recruitment Criteria ..................................................................................................68
8. Major Themes, Subthemes, and Demonstration of Themes ......................................75
9. Participants’ Demographics .......................................................................................77
10. Racial Distribution of Students ................................................................................78
11. Students’ Eligibility for Free or Reduced Lunch .....................................................79
12. Participants’ Credential Profile ................................................................................85
13. Teachers’ Years of Teaching, in Current Position, and in Inclusion .........................86
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Response to Intervention Three -Tiered Model .................................................................38
3. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Umbrella .................................................................40
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The drive for inclusive practices has required the special education teacher to become an integral part of the general education setting. Yet as the nation recovers from the ubiquitous COVID-19 pandemic, many schools are challenged to provide a learning environment that is conducive to all students while balancing the need to provide safety and an appropriate education. As schools find their way to a new normal, this study examines the unique role of the special education teacher engaged in inclusive practices. Using a phenomenological approach combined with the constant comparative method, this study explores what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function. The purpose is three-fold: to depict the essence of the experience of using inclusive practices, to deliver an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent while providing opportunities for inclusion, and to convey a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special education teacher during a global pandemic.

The following is a statement of the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. Next, the dissertation structure is outlined, followed by definitions of pertinent terms used throughout the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of what was written.
Statement of the Research Problem

How do special education teachers at the high school level implement inclusion to fulfill their responsibilities as stated in IDEA? Furthermore, how is FAPE provided in the midst of unprecedented disruption of school management?

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. By April 2, 2020, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced Executive Order 2020-35 suspending all in-person instruction in Michigan K-12 schools through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education. On April 3, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a recommendation that all Americans wear a cloth face covering in public. Moving from a manic state of “lockdown” to the more measured order of “shelter in place,” the country slowly inched toward regaining a sense of normalcy, albeit under heavy restrictions. In June 2020, Governor Whitmer provided the Michigan Safe Schools Roadmap, which school districts used to develop a personalized template to continue educating students. Working through Phases 1-3, districts devised plans to provide instruction during remote learning. By the middle of the school year, many districts moved to Phase 4.

There appears to be minimal information available shedding light on the experiences of high school special education teachers as they use inclusive practices to fulfill their responsibilities in suburban and rural school districts. Upon a review of the literature, studies were found on NCLB and academic performance (Cronin et al., 2005; Theoharis et al., 2016; Ysseldyke et al., 2004). In addition, research exists highlighting the plight of special education in the urban school setting (Bacon, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). In a study by De Silva (2013), it was noted that effective inclusive practices required great attention.
The organizational structure and provision of educational services, as well as teacher and parent input, were considered to be integral components to the formation of an inclusive culture.

Refining the search to look specifically at coteaching in rural schools revealed a study conducted to explore the importance of contextual factors in the effectiveness of coteaching from the teacher’s point of view within suburban and rural school districts across the nation. Relationships and shared planning were evidenced as significant indicators; however, little information was provided on specific evidence-based practices implemented (Stefanidis et al., 2019). When further filters—2010-2020, articles, special education, special education teacher—were applied, the focus changed to teacher preparation and the most significant research emphasized the benefits of collaboration between two teacher candidates and cooperating teacher within the coteaching concept (Tschida et al., 2015). More relevant was Scruggs et al., (2007), which uncovered deficits in the implementation of coteaching models and a tendency for practitioners to use complementary teaching, deemed to be the least effective of the coteaching models. The researchers also noted that recommended practices were not often implemented, resulting in student deficit in peer mediation, mnemonics, study skills, self-advocacy, and self-monitoring (Scruggs et al., 2007).

More importantly, research is scarce in the area of supports for students receiving services during a crisis (Minkos & Gelbar, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Ohrt et al., 2020; Sharfstein & Morphew, 2020). Opportunities have emerged as the nation navigates the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those challenges have accelerated the need to keep student equity front and center of the education debate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). How has that been demonstrated during this time? Teachers are one of our greatest resources and the collaboration between the general and special education teacher creates a symbiotic relationship that can
become a powerhouse to enact dynamic and meaningful change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). To date, a collectivized body of knowledge does not exist.

**Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study is to identify practices implemented on a regular basis specifically by special education teachers while providing academic support in inclusive settings. It delivers an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent and conveys a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special educator situated across Southwest Michigan during a time of crisis/pandemic. Originally, the study was to understand the essence of the experience of high school special education inclusion teachers as they spend their professional time daily. Specifically, the study explored the types of supports provided to the general education teacher and those used to support students in inclusive settings.

However, during the initial stages of the study, the COVID-19 pandemic insidiously worked its way across the globe leaving in its wake a state of confusion and anxiety. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. By April 2, 2020, Governor Whitmer announced Executive Order 2020-35 suspending all in-person instruction in Michigan K-12 schools through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education. On April 3, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a recommendation that all Americans wear a cloth face covering in public.

Moving from a manic state of “lockdown” to the more measured order of “shelter in place,” the country slowly inched toward regaining a sense of normalcy, albeit under heavy restrictions. In June 2020, Governor Whitmer provided the *Michigan Safe Schools Roadmap*, which school districts used to develop a more personalized template of how they would continue to educate their students. Districts, at the time of the study, were either working through Phases
1-3, where in-person instruction was restricted to remote learning, or to Phase 4, which permitted in-person instruction with required safety protocols in place. Recognizing that conditions were drastically changing the education arena, the focus of the study turned to exploring the lived experience of teaching during a pandemic. The purpose of the study became to capture what it means to be a special education teacher—how they are spending their time, how they are providing services to students, how they feel about their current position.

Phenomenology research focuses on the common meaning of a group of individuals as they experience a phenomenon together (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of special education teachers in the inclusive setting to gain a deep understanding of (a) how they spend their time, (b) how they interact with the general education teacher, (c) how they decide upon academic strategies, and (d) how they delineate their services from that of the general education teacher. The study is to understand the essence of the experience of secondary special education teachers and understand how they spend their professional time on a daily basis. Specifically, the study will explore the types of supports provided to the general education teacher and those used to support students in inclusive settings. The intent of the study is to make meaning of the lived experiences of inclusion teachers as they provide services in the inclusive setting, and in so doing develop an understanding of the context in which special education teachers operate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do special educators use their time to respond to the demands of their job?
2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level?

3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in districts across Southwest Michigan?

4. As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting, what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their value added?

5. What is the experience of high school special education inclusion teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?

**Significance of the Study**

This research is intended to explore special education teachers’ use and experience of inclusive practices when working with general education teachers to provide students access to the general education curriculum. The drive for inclusive practices has required the special education teacher to become an integral part of the general education setting. Yet as the nation recovers from the ubiquitous COVID-19 virus, many schools are challenged to provide a learning environment that is conducive to all students while balancing the need to provide safety and an appropriate education. As schools find their way to a new normal, this study examines the unique role of the special education teacher engaged in inclusive practices. Using a phenomenological approach combined with the constant comparative method, this study explores what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function. The purpose was three-fold: to depict the essence of the experience of using inclusive practices, to deliver an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent while providing opportunities for inclusion, and to convey a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special education teacher during a global pandemic.
Findings will have the potential to improve instructional practices and inform decision makers as they structure the workforce to operate more efficiently. Findings may also be used to make informed decisions on the purpose and content of teacher preparation materials and professional development.

**Dissertation Structure**

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter I provides a statement of the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. A review of the pertinent literature regarding special education, inclusion, and the supports designed to enact provisions for students with learning disabilities is explained in Chapter II. The study’s qualitative design, participants, setting, procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness are detailed in Chapter III. The results of the investigation are reported in Chapter IV. Chapter V offers a discussion of the findings, draws conclusions related to the questions investigated, provides implications for practice, and presents limitations and recommendations for future research.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Asynchronous learning:* Asynchronous learning is a general term used to describe forms of education, instruction, and learning that do not occur in the same place or at the same time.

*Collaborative teaching (Coteaching):* Two professional, certified teachers working together (usually a general education teacher and special education teacher) sharing the responsibility of delivering instruction for all students in general classrooms, including students with special needs, using flexible approaches to meet individuals’ needs (Friend, 2008).

*COVID-19:* Abbreviation of “Coronavirus Disease-2019.” The name for the actual disease state caused by the coronavirus COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2 are often used
interchangeably, though this is inaccurate. The term **COVID-19** should be used to discuss the disease, while **SARS-CoV-2** should designate the virus itself (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**COVID-19 modes of instruction:** Remote, hybrid, virtual, face-to-face fully remote.

**Differentiated instruction:** Differentiated instruction refers to instruction provided by a teacher that is designed strategically and based on individual student needs (Whitten et al., 2019).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):** The Every Student Succeeds Act replaces the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2002. ESSA (P.L. 114-95) was passed in 2015 and requires all American students be held to high academic standards. It provides protection for minorities and those in need, holds high expectations regarding student outcomes, ensures needed information to support everyone in need, provides resources to improve education, and prepares students for the future (Darrow, 2016).

**Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):** Free Appropriate Public Education refers to all special education services and related services that are provided for students with special needs with no charge to preschools, elementary or secondary school in the state, with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and meeting the standard State Education Agency (SEA) (U.S. Congress, 2004).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) was passed to ensure all students with special needs have access to free, appropriate public education, which provides special education services and related services to meet their needs. The law also provides rights and protections for students with special needs and their parents. More importantly, the law aids all educational institutions to provide effective educational opportunities to students with disabilities (U.S. Congress, 2004).
Individualized Education Program (IEP): An Individualized Education Program is an individualized document for students who receive special education services and related services to meet their needs. As mandated by law, an IEP includes the student’s current level of performance and annual goals, special education and related services, time spent with nondisabled peers, state and district-wide testing, dates and places related to services, required transition services and needs related to transition, majority age, and measuring process (Yell et al., 2013).

Intervention: Intervention, also referred to as remediation, will be defined as a strategy or supplemental activity used to reteach or intervene on a specific skill, concept, or set of skills that a student is struggling with or has been identified as an area of deficit. If receiving an intervention, a student should remain in the general education setting during core instruction and receive intervention support outside of the core instruction time to not reduce the student’s rate of learning (Skinner et al., 2005).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): Least Restrictive Environment refers to the environment that provides the maximum possible meaningful educational opportunities for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, in the same school that students with no disabilities attend with the use of necessary supports (Wright & Wright, 2004).

Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA): MAISA is comprised of superintendents and administrators representing the 56 Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) in the State of Michigan. ISD administrators provide and coordinate essential services to their constituent school districts to facilitate teaching and learning.

includes the full Michigan rules and pairs each rule with any of the relevant regulations from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

**Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS):** A district’s MTSS infrastructure should include the following six essential elements: (a) a comprehensive balanced assessment system, (b) collaborative work that builds capacity and infrastructure, (c) use of data-driven dialogue as an approach to problem solving, (d) a continuum of available, effective interventions, (e) a process to document implementation fidelity, and (f) on-going program evaluation. MTSS is a comprehensive infrastructure that seeks to meet the needs of all students at varying levels of intensity and encompasses the academic, social-emotional-behavioral demands of learning, and students’ mental health. MTSS should emphasize a system of support, rather than just singular tiers of interventions.

**Pandemic:** A specific type of epidemic—the outbreak of widespread disease—that spreads over greater geographic distances and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population. Pandemics are relatively rare events, and not every epidemic qualifies as a pandemic. The World Health Organization declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak as a pandemic in March 2020 (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**Michigan Return to School Roadmap Phases** (MDE, 2020):

- **Phases 1-3.** Phases 1-3 indicates that community spread of the virus is increasing and substantial; there is concern about health system capacity; testing and tracing efforts may not be sufficient to control the spread of the pandemic. During Phases 1-3 there is no in-person instruction. Mode of instruction is remote only.

- **Phase 4.** Phase 4 warrants that school preparedness and response activities continue, such as conducting ongoing surveillance and executing a series of active mitigation...
measures. At Phase 4, schools should be prepared to implement social distancing measures. Short-term dismissals and suspension of extracurricular activities should be expected for cleaning and contact tracing purposes. Phase 4 necessitates the need for schools to consider the judgment of the local health department for the sub-region (i.e., county or ISD) of concern. During Phase 4, in-person instruction is permitted with required safety protocols. Schools may choose a combination of face to face and remote (hybrid leaning).

- **Phase 5.** Phase 5 continues school preparedness and response activities around surveillance and active mitigation with loosening of required safety protocols. Students and teachers at increased risk of severe illness should remain prepared to implement remote teaching and learning modalities. During Phase 5, schools are open for in-person instruction with minimal required safety protocols.

- **Phase 6.** Phase 6 is considered post-pandemic. At Phase 6 there are few, if any, active COVID-19 cases locally. It is assumed that community spread is not expected to return, and schools are open for in person instruction.

**Remote/Distance Learning:** Remote learning occurs when the learner and instructor, or source of information, are separated by time and distance and therefore cannot meet in a traditional classroom setting. Information is typically transmitted via technology (email, discussion boards, video conference, or audio bridge) (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**Response to Intervention (RTI):** A requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Response to Intervention is a multi-tiered prevention, identification, and support system, which provides the necessary support to ensure academic success for all students (Whitten et al., 2019).
**Social and Emotional Learning:** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**Synchronous Learning:** Synchronous learning refers to a learning event in which a group of students are engaging in learning at the same time. Before learning technology allowed for synchronous learning environments, most online education took place through asynchronous learning methods (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**Trauma-Informed Approach:** A trauma-informed school recognizes that exposure to trauma is widespread and impacts student social, emotional, academic, and physical functioning, and responds by fully integrating and sustaining trauma awareness and knowledge into all school policies, procedures, practices, and the physical environment in order to create a culture that emphasizes the safety and well-being of both staff and students and that creates opportunities for students who are trauma survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment and to thrive academically. For many schools, becoming trauma-informed requires a paradigm shift across all levels to re-focus on understanding what may have happened to a child and what supports will help a child heal, rather than on setting universal expectations or applying punitive discipline to shape student learning and behavior (Michigan.gov, 2020a).

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all individuals (CAST, 2012). UDL principles create options for how instruction is presented, how students express their ideas, and how teachers can engage students in their learning (CAST, 2012). UDL is based on three main principles: representation, action and expression, and engagement.
Urban cluster (UC): An urban cluster encompasses at least 2,500 and fewer than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Urbanized area (UA): An urbanized area encompasses 50,000 or more people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Summary

This chapter provided a statement of the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. The dissertation structure was outlined, followed by definitions of pertinent terms used throughout the study. The following chapter provides a review of the categories assigned to special education and the individual education program designed to teach students in special education, followed by a review of laws and regulations that contextualize special education. Next is an explanation of the Least Restrictive Environment as it is interpreted by the General Education Movement and the Inclusion Movement. The chapter then provides a closer look at inclusion in light of a multi-tiered system of supports and the impact of implementing inclusion in the classroom. The next section, Tools of the Trade, reviews effective strategies that may be used by educators to implement inclusion and is followed by an outline of current state-level MTSS activities that assist educators in the implementation of inclusive practices. The chapter concludes with a review of state recommendations as they relate to instruction and the COVID-19 pandemic. A selection of applicable research and studies on online/virtual learning are addressed to highlight the challenges of maintaining equity and FAPE in the classroom as it changes to meet the demands of the pandemic.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following provides a review of the categories assigned to special education and the individual education program designed to teach students in special education, followed by a review of laws and regulations that contextualize special education. Next is an explanation of the Least Restrictive Environment as it is interpreted by the General Education Movement and the Inclusion Movement. The chapter then provides a closer look at inclusion in light of a multi-tiered system of supports and the impact of implementing inclusion in the classroom. The next section, Tools of the Trade, reviews effective strategies that may be used by educators to implement inclusion and is followed by an outline of current state level MTSS activities that assist educators in the implementation of inclusive practices. The chapter concludes with a review of state recommendations as they relate to instruction and the COVID-19 pandemic. A selection of applicable research and studies on online/virtual learning are addressed to highlight the challenges of maintaining equity and FAPE in the classroom as it changes to meet the demands of the pandemic.

Special Education Categories

Special education provides for students who are identified under one of 14 categories. These categories are the distribution of disabilities determined to adversely impact educational performance: autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic
impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness (Deutsch Smith, 2007).

The term *special education* means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including

(A) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and

(B) instruction in physical education (IDEA Special Education 1401 [29] [A -B]).

When a student has been identified with one of the above, they are eligible for special education services. These services are stipulated in the individualized education program (IEP) and cover a wide variety of evidence-based practices implemented to meet the unique needs of students. Each IEP is written by a team of educational professionals who are knowledgeable of the student’s strengths and challenges academically, emotionally, and physically. The IEP comprises goals, both functional and academic; a progress report on existing goals and objectives; a statement of the special education; related services; supplementary aids and modifications to programs; and school personnel supports to assist the child in reaching stated goals. The IEP also identifies individual accommodations whereby the true extent of student performance can be measured relative to state and district-wide assessments (Lerner & Johns, 2009; Salend, 2016). As its definition states, the IEP is a “statement of the specific special education and related services to be provided to the child and the extent that the child will be able to participate in regular educational programs” (34 CFR §300.346 (a) (3)).

**Laws and Regulations Pertaining to Special Education**

The significance of the IEP relates to a series of evolving laws and federal mandates. Early laws pertaining to special education derived from the application of the 14th Amendment
to the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. In this case, *Brown* challenged the practice of segregating students according to race and ruled that separate was not equal. Consequently, civil rights were seen through the lens of education. This decision eventually resulted in providing education to all children regardless of perceived learning potential. The precedent provided equal protection under the law, led to changes in school policies for students with disabilities, and restricted states from denying any person within their jurisdiction equal protection under the law (Yell & Drasgow, 2007). In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act became the landmark law for people with disabilities in schools and in society. In 1975, P.L. 94-142, *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA) guaranteed that all children would receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This meant that all students could be prepared for further education, employment, and independent living; specifically, that those formally excluded from school could now receive their education in the general education setting (Petch-Hogan & Haggard, 1999). In addition to FAPE, the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provision was established to identify the environment that best meets the needs of the student. This provision forms the basis for interpreting inclusion and drives the purpose of the current study.

A name change was seen when in 1990 the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA) changed to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). By 1997, amendments stated that the general education setting would be the least restrictive environment (LRE) for the majority of students with disabilities requiring educators to justify the placement of a student with disabilities in an alternative setting (Friend, 2008). Further, it cautioned that students would only be removed from the regular education environment when the nature or
severity of the disability was such that education in regular classes, with the use of supplemental aids and services, could not be satisfactorily achieved (Vallecorsa et al., 2000).

By the time the U.S Department of Education implemented IDEA 2004, its purpose was

… to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 356)

As the intent of IDEA 2004 is understood more fully, it is clear teachers must be equipped to teach a diverse group of students to provide a wide variety of evidence-based practices implemented to meet the unique needs of students. In a diverse classroom many aptitudes are represented implicating the need to address the issue of inclusion in a tangible and deliberate manner. Decades ago, it was pointed out that general education teachers lacked the will and capacity to accommodate all students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Moreover, it was recommended that local schools should use creative measures to employ a variety of educational approaches to achieve more productive learning for all students (Wang, 1987, p. 27). Dating back even further, recommendations were made for teachers and other professionals to work collaboratively “to become sufficiently competent and confident to grant special educator small enough caseloads so they may work intensively with most-deserving students” (Dunn, 1968, p. 6).

Contrasting the directive to provide education to all in the general education setting, Sternberg (1997) refers to a closed system as he describes the layout of education in the U.S.

Many of our measurements to mark ability focus on memorization and analysis, forgoing other more practical methods such as creating, inventing imagining and designing in order to put
into practice, implement and show learning. The tests given in school make a pretty accurate prediction of a student’s performance because they are aligned with the concepts being taught. The tendency is to label students as deficit learners who are not strong in these abilities, never recognizing the strengths they possess in creativity and practicality (Sternberg, 1988, 1997).

Interpretations of LRE

The General Education Initiative

As changes to special education were taking place, so too were the ways in which general education was being administered. The development of the Regular Education Initiative (REI), a movement to address the gap/deficits of student performance between special education and general education (Jenkins et al., 1990), began to take shape. It was believed that students with disabilities could be serviced more effectively through the general education classroom than through the special education system (Lerner, 2000; Wang et al., 1986). Leading advocate of the initiative, Madeline Will (1986), who was the Assistant Secretary of Education and head of the Office of Special Education Programs at the time, argued against pullout approaches due to their inability to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. Special education placements separated students from their general education peers and were cited as the reason for the stigmatization placed on students receiving services (Will, 1986). Advocates of the REI (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Will, 1986) called for a more fully integrated educational experience for students with disabilities and criticized the divided and fragmented education services being provided to students with disabilities. Supporters of the REI urged special education and general education teachers to work together to educate all students (Friend, 2008).
The Inclusion Movement

Civil rights as seen through the lens of education has promulgated the need for inclusion, which in its early existence was viewed with quite a different lens than it is today. Written in the mid-90s, the National Study of Inclusive Education provided a description of inclusion by addressing the deficits found in a separate special education system at that time:

It is a recognition that the current design of a separate special education system does not provide the desired outcomes (academic, behavioral, social) for students; has failed to assure beneficial post-school outcomes; is not in keeping with the broad societal efforts of integration; and is excessively costly. (Lipsky & Gartner, 1995, p. 14)

It argues that mainstream (another term connected to least restrictive environment) and true inclusion are not the same, that inclusion combines LRE with FAPE to provide appropriate services to meet the individual student’s unique strengths and needs. (Lipsky & Gartner, 1995).

Referring to the law, IDEA does not use the term *inclusion*, neither does the Department of Education define it; the onus is on school districts to determine the least restrictive environment for pupils (OSERS, 1994). This highlights the importance of the IEP and the relationship between IDEA’s LRE requirements and the IEP (IDEA, 2004).

Inclusion Contextualized

In 1968, Lloyd Dunn, a national pioneer in the development of tests to better understand, teach, and assist individuals with disability with developmental disabilities, wrote an article in defense of inclusion by highlighting the practice of misidentification of black and underprivileged students in special education. He believed the rationale behind this practice was to remove the expectation of general education teachers to teach such children. He condemned self-contained classrooms and segregated education for *mildly retarded* children. In their place, he proposed a *Blue Print for Change*, with a focus on leadership, curriculum, reconstruction of buildings, and professional development (Dunn, 1968). Moreover, recommendations were made
to use prescriptive teaching, itinerant and resource room teaching, environmental modifications, sensory and perceptual training. This all sounds familiar in light of what is entailed in school improvement today (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Lecount-Johnson, 2019). However, considering this was written decades ago, one cannot help but applaud Dunn for his insightfulness (Dunn, 1968). Finally, Dunn posits that positioning the special educator as part of general education and “not apart from” it would acknowledge that all children have assets and deficits that are not permanently fixed (Dunn, 1968, p. 14).

Providing the conditions for a symbiotic relationship to take place would prove to be a sensible course of action. Indeed, there was a time when some believed that special education considered itself as an entity that functioned parallel to and separate from general education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). We no longer want to remove students who were once termed slow learners but focus more on cognitive and language development, including academic instruction to help them generalize, generate and evaluate knowledge (Dunn, 1968).

Special education can now be seen to deliver evidence-based programs to effectively meet desired outcomes. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004), regarding expectations for students receiving services, IDEA subchapter part A, section 1400 (c) (5) (A) (i – ii) states that students will:

i. meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and

ii. be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible.

Interpreted at the state level, Rule 81 lists the responsibilities necessary for the position of special educator:

MARSE R 340.1781 Teachers of students with disabilities; endorsement requirements. Rule 81
A teacher seeking an endorsement or full approval by the department shall meet all of the following requirements, in conjunction with those of R 340.1782, R 340.1786 to R 340.1788, R 340.1790, R 340.1795 to R 340.1797, and R 340.1799 to R 340.1799c, before being employed by an intermediate school district, local school district, public school academy, or other agency operating special education programs and services: (a) The requisite knowledge, understanding, skills, and dispositions for effective practice related to all of the following: (i) Utilizing research-based models, theories, and philosophies for teaching students with an array of disabilities within different placements. (ii) Assessing students with disabilities for identification and teaching. (iii) Implementing accommodations and modifications for classroom, district, and statewide assessments. (iv) Using assistive technology devices to increase, maintain, or improve the capabilities of students with impairments. (v) Communicating, consulting, and collaborating with parents/guardians, paraprofessionals, general educators, administrators, and human services personnel. (vi) Developing, implementing, and evaluating individualized education programs. (vii) Planning, organizing, scheduling, and conducting individualized education program team meetings, including parental and student participation. (viii) Preparing students with disabilities for transitions consisting of preschool to elementary through post-secondary environments and employment.

Needless to say, LRE is a point of contention. There are many who believe that the national agenda of The Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH) championed the complete eradication of the continuum of services and essentially Special Education (Biklen, 1985; Giangreco et al., 1993; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Stainbeck & Stainbeck, 1992; Thousand & Villa, 1990; York & Vandercook, 1991). Founded in 1975, TASH advocated for human rights and inclusion of people with significant disabilities and support needs.

Equity, diversity, and quality of life drive the organization to

Transform school communities based on social justice principles in which all students (a) are presumed competent, (b) are welcomed as valued members of all general education classes and extra-curricular activities in their local schools, (c) fully participate and learn alongside their same age peers in general education instruction based on the general education curriculum and (d) experience reciprocal social relationships. (TASH, 2021)

In progressing toward a more responsive way to address students’ needs, initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) were adopted (Salend, 2016; Samuels, 2016; Whitten et al., 2019). Consequently, effective inclusion practices have developed to provide adequate resources and support so that students receiving services can
learn from the same meaningful, challenging, and appropriate curriculum delivered to their general education peers in the general education setting (Friend & Bursack, 2006; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Lerner & Johns, 2009).

With a conglomerate of policies settled, the place of service no longer drives the argument (Fore et al., 2008). Rather, strategies—their implementation and their effectiveness—are the concern of delivery of service. A brief look at research on inclusion in general revealed studies by Weiss and Lloyd (2002) and Washburn-Moses (2005), which examined the role of the special educator in cotaught settings and determined that a lack of understanding could lead to inefficient use of the methods in appropriate settings. Inclusion was looked at from the perspective of the general education teacher in an international study by Akçamete and Dağli Gökbulut (2018), which revealed minimal use of evidenced based strategies in the classroom by the general education teacher. However, these same teachers demonstrated appreciation for the expertise of the special educator. Ironically, general educators were reluctant to engage in coteaching practices (Akçamete & Dağli Gökbulut, 2018). Hsien et al. (2009) provided another international perspective by investigating the attitudes and beliefs of general and special education teachers in Australia. Results revealed a correlation between higher educational qualifications in special education and positive views toward inclusion. Both studies indicate the need for further dialogue around the importance of inclusion and the role the special educator plays in its implementation.

**Inclusion – Setting the Standard**

Early studies set the standard in defining inclusion. York et al. (1992) describe inclusion as a value to live by where communities work together to support one another and maximize
individual potential. Sayeski and Cooper (2003) refer to inclusion as the belief that individuals with disabilities are a part of society and therefore should be included in all aspects of society.

From an educational point of view, early studies referred to inclusion as a merged system where individualized adaptations and supports are made available to all children in general education (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Reynolds et al., 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1992; Will, 1986). Reynolds et al. (1987) further likened it to the joining of effective practices from special and regular education to establish a more inclusive general education system. Friend and Pope (2005) viewed it as the understanding that all students, including gifted students, average learners, and those students who struggle should be fully welcomed members of their school communities where all school professionals share responsibility for their learning. Suffice it to say, inclusion is a philosophy recognizing all children as capable learners.

Schools recognize the importance of continuing to develop their understanding of inclusion as an ongoing process and are encouraged to scrutinize systems and procedures to maintain positive outcomes (Vaughan, 2002). Many European schools use a template called The Index for Inclusion to help address existing biases in school culture, policies, and practices that may have adverse effects on creating an inclusive environment. Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus (2014) use this Index of Inclusion to form their idea of inclusion, “the fundamental right of all children and adults to fully participate, and contribute in all aspects of life and culture, without restriction or threat of marginalization” (p. 32). This understanding of inclusion is used to adjust the deficit thinking found to be the impetus for many schools as inclusive environments are created, that being to grant students with learning disabilities access to regular education settings only when they have proven their ability to perform at a given standard. Dudley-Marling
and Burns (2014) are like-minded in their understanding of inclusion and embrace the notion of classrooms that serve heterogeneous groups and provide diverse opportunities to learn.

According to Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014), inclusion is more than a service delivery model implementing a set of research-based strategies (Akçamete & Dağlı Gökbüyük, 2018; Washburn-Moses, 2005; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Inclusion is viewed through a social constructivist lens, where it considers the regular classroom the default setting for all children. In this setting, students with disabilities receive extra support from specially trained teachers to function in the regular classroom. Focusing on cultural and social contexts, the social constructivist stance on inclusion stresses structural reform over the individual remediation (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Recommendations stated by Dunn (1968) align with these more recent reflections. Others (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016) echo the sentiments of earlier researchers, championing the right for both general and special education students to develop to their greatest potential. Collaboration, consultation, and cooperation are seen as key components in bringing the complexities of inclusive practices together. Described through the social justice lens, Robinson (2017), in a study on the efficacy of teacher education in inclusive practices, identified inclusion as “the process through which education systems respond to diverse learners in ways that enable participation, equal opportunities, respect for difference and social justice. It places particular focus on the inclusion of learners with special educational needs within mainstream classrooms” (p. 164).

**Tools of the Trade**

**Instructional Strategies**

The relation between inclusion and the provision of Least Restrictive Environment of IDEA solidifies as both concepts join to make accessible the general education curriculum to
students receiving services using instructional strategies. Instructional strategies are techniques teachers use to help students become independent, strategic learners. These strategies become learning strategies when students independently select the appropriate ones and use them effectively to accomplish tasks or meet goals. Instructional strategies can motivate students and help them focus attention, organize information for understanding and remembering, and monitor and assess learning. Instructional strategies, which refer to specific methods and approaches that “provide the conditions under which learning goals will most likely be attained” (Yang, 2017).

**Effective Teaching**

Generally speaking, effective teaching practices are a series of characteristics embedded into a range of teaching methods or instructional strategies (Brophy, 1994). Our goal as educators is to effectively align instructional practices to learning objectives (Lenz et al., 1987). Learning objectives are often designed using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which is a set of guidelines written to improve student performance in reading literature and informational text. For many educators, Bloom’s taxonomy provides the cognitive process by which effective teachers can help students achieve the learning objective. Higher-level thinking for students is achieved as they analyze, evaluate, and create. Meanwhile, the teacher’s responsibility is to probe, guide, observe, evaluate, question, organize, dissect, act as a resource; clarify, accept, guide; and facilitate, extend, reflect, analyze, evaluate consecutively (Jones, 2012, adapted from Revised Bloom’s Resources). Many teachers use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all individuals (CAST, 2012). UDL is based on three main principles: representation, action and expression, and engagement. Used individually or combined, these principles create options for how instruction
is presented, how students express their ideas, and how teachers can engage students in their learning (CAST, 2012).

These teaching methods integrate strategies to plan, manage, deliver, and evaluate instruction (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995), and establish a positive classroom environment (Wang, 1987). Other experts include maintaining a high rate of success, addressing prior knowledge and previous lessons, checking for understanding through questioning, implementing guided and independent practice (King-Sears & Cummins, 1996), providing immediate and specific feedback (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995), using cumulative reviews (Rosenshine, 1997), and using student progress data to make instructional decisions (Ysseldyke, 2001).

**Evidence-Based Practices**

Specifically, teaching practices are recognized as evidence-based when they result in “multiple, high-quality, experimental or quasi-experimental (often including single-case research) studies demonstrating that the practice has a meaningful impact on consumer (e.g., student) outcomes” (Cook & Odem, 2013, p. 136). Evidence-based practices are often content focused and appropriate for students at different developmental levels. These practices can be used to deliver core instruction for all students, targeted instruction for students at risk, and individualized instruction for those students needing intensive intervention (McCray et al., 2017). McCray et al. (2017) and McLeskey and Brownell (2015) identify best practices with descriptors and recommendations, such as combining teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies with vocabulary instruction, scaffolding supports with modeling, and delivering explicit instruction with process, providing a clear indication of their merit and worth. More on explicit instruction will be addressed further in a later section.
Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson (1999), a strong proponent of differentiated instruction, characterizes this teaching method as collaborative and small group learning, reciprocal teaching, and continual assessment. Areas of focus for differentiated instruction include Content, Process, Projects, and Learning Environment (Tomlinson, 1999). Going deeper to describe each of these areas, differentiation based on content, requires teachers’ use of data to assess areas of student learning deficits and implement strategies to help them be successful. Regarding process, teachers make inquiry into instructional practices to help students make sense of what they are learning, while projects relate to reviews and assessments of various assignments so that students may demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. As teachers consider the learning environment, both the physical and psychological aspects of their classroom become the focal point in promoting inclusion (Tomlinson, 1999).

Lawrence-Brown (2004) concurs, positing that classrooms designed to accommodate all children will implement differentiated instruction:

- Differentiated instruction supports the classroom as a community to which age peers belong and can/should be nourished as individuals. With differentiated instruction and appropriate supports, intended benefits of inclusion for both students with and without disabilities can be realized. (p. 59)

- Emphasizing the need to design a high-level quality lesson from which supports can be added, Lawrence-Brown (2004) presented a multilevel lesson planning system comprising additional supports to the curriculum to ensure a high rate of success for students with mild learning disabilities, an enriched curriculum to adapt to the needs of those students with special gifts and talents, and a prioritized curriculum to allow the general curriculum to be available to students with severe disabilities. The ultimate purpose was to allow students with complex
learning needs to gain access to the general education curriculum. This is a practice of belief that was reflected in various studies (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Dunn, 1968; Robinson, 2017).

Collaborative and small group learning are two components that form the basis of a support system used by many schools to create connections within a diverse group of students. Known as LINK, the system was first developed and implemented at the middle school level for students with autism but is now proliferate at many levels. The goal is to involve students with autism in the general education setting and ensure that all students are acknowledged for their similarities and differences (Ziegler & Schoemer, 1999) for students with autism.

**Explicit Instruction Direct Instruction**

As mentioned earlier, another component of effective practices is the use of explicit instruction. The success of students receiving services within the inclusive setting is dependent on the teacher’s ability to provide explicit instruction that includes demonstration, guided practice, independent practice, active learner involvement, and meaningful connections of content to real life (King-Sears, 1997). It is important to teach new information strategically with the clearly defined connections, so students do not confuse the new information with what they already know (Kame’enui & Simmons, 1999).

Consequently, explicit instruction from the observer’s point of view will be seen as clear, sequential and direct instructions to promote student mastery of skills and concepts. Further, as teachers engage in modeling skills and concepts, students are guided through the learning process. After many opportunities to practice, students arrive at a state of independent practice. At this point mastery and generalization is achieved (Hughes et al., 2017). More specifically, explicit instruction comprises evidence-based teacher behaviors to communicate clear and concise practice strategies with affirming and corrective feedback to promote student
engagement and long-term retention. *Direct instruction* is a common term used with learning disabilities but is not to confused with Direct Instruction (DI), which is defined as (a) an explicit step-by-step model, (b) development of mastery at each step, (c) correction for student errors, (d) gradual fading from teacher-directed activities to student independence, (e) use of ample systematic practice with a range of examples, and (f) cumulative review of newly learned concepts (Gersten et al., 1987). Some argue that direct instruction and explicit instruction are similar enough to be one and the same; however, direct instruction refers to the more general practice of teachers’ instructions that lead to effective teaching behaviors and is considered the precursor of explicit instruction (Hughes et al., 2017).

**Strategy Instruction**

Conversely, strategy instruction is considered an instructional approach that builds on the components of direct instruction by incorporating more intricate skills and using highly detailed modeling (Hughes et al., 2017). As early as 1991, Hughes and Schumaker (1991) found students with learning disabilities who learned a test-taking strategy scored higher on tests across content areas. This demonstrates the need for students with disabilities to be taught explicitly strategies to help them learn new information (Rosenberg et al., 2010). Strategy instruction such as SQ3R, and mnemonics are taught to enable learners to become independent by developing specific comprehension skills and strengthening memory (Rosenberg et al., 2010). To investigate the efficacy of mnemonics, Scruggs and Mastropieri (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 experiments involving the use of mnemonic strategies with students with mild disabilities and found a very high level of effectiveness with an effect size of 1.62. The effectiveness of the mnemonic strategies was consistent across a variety of subject areas, ages, instructional settings, and disabilities.
**Instructional Routines**

One of the principals of effective instruction is optimizing time on task. Research shows that the more time students are actively participating in instructional activities, the more likely they are able to learn (Ellis & Worthington, 1994). Consequently, teachers engaged in instructional routines (Archer & Hughes, 2011) to deliver explicit instruction that gives structure to time and interactions will provide ways to encourage active participation (Turner & Patrick, 2004), letting students know what to expect in terms of participation, supporting classroom management and organization and promoting productive classroom relationships for teaching and learning.

**Collaborative Teaching as a Means to Practice Inclusion**

Once the doorway is open, inclusive practices can bring meaning to student learning. An effective means of facilitating inclusive practices is through collaborative teaching (Bear & Proctor, 1990; Friend & Barron, 2016; Klinger et al., 1998; Magiera & Zigmond, 2005). This takes place when general and special education teachers provide instruction together to students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom (Friend & Cook, 2003).

Although implemented informally during the 1960s, by the ’80s, coteaching was officially identified as a method for teaching students with learning disabilities in the general education setting educating (Friend & Barron, 2016).

Wanting to understand the efficacy of special educators when in various settings, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) conducted a constant comparative analysis to reveal four roles played out by special education teachers: providing support, teach content in alternative setting, teach selective portions of the curriculum to the main class, and shared delivery of the content to all students. Special education teachers working with students in the resource room reported teaching content
individualized for each student at a slower pace. Further, content was segmented and simplified. Examining the difficulties found in the general education setting, it was noted that variations in skill levels were impeding student interaction and engagement. Lack of staffing caused teachers to split their time between classes, which ultimately affected parity between the general special education teachers. Results led the researchers to conclude that LRE must dictate when, if at all, a coteaching model should be adopted (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

Thus, it is important to note the necessary steps to coteaching employ joint planning time for the special and general education teacher (Bear & Proctor, 1990; Klinger et al., 1998; Scruggs et al., 2007). In addition, highly ranked was shared vision and goals by general and special education teacher, along with a time to collaborate. Training opportunities were also deemed important (Scruggs et al., 2007). An aspect of coteaching that warrants consideration was highlighted by a time study report, led by Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010), where they examined the time expenditure of special educators. It was found that teachers spent the majority of their time in instructional support roles when engaged in the service delivery of coteaching. Continuing in the light of time expenditure, Magiera and Zigmond (2005) found students with disabilities received more individual instruction with coteaching, but less interaction time with the general education teacher when the special education teacher was present in the classroom.

While coteaching may present some challenges, where a variety of coteaching models are used, teachers are able to create an environment more conducive to meeting the diverse needs of the classrooms because of the opportunity to differentiate instruction, collect data, and assess student progress (Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013). Also established is the fact that when carried out correctly, teachers involved in this delivery of service share responsibility and accountability for planning, differentiating and delivering instruction as well as evaluating, grading, and
disciplining students. Academic instruction and supportive services are provided in the classroom using one or a combination of several models: Complementary Teach, Parallel Teach, Station Teach, Alternative Teach, and Team Teach. The Complementary Teach model involves one teacher leading while the other teacher collects data. This model is designed to take advantage of the expertise of one teacher in a specific area while allowing the other to assist and monitor the classroom. The Parallel Teach model is used to lower student/teacher ratio when teaching new material, to review and practice previous material, or to encourage student discussion and participation. The Station Teach model is best used when material is difficult but not sequential, when several different topics are important, or when reviewing material is an important objective of the lesson. The Alternative Teach model is most beneficial to provide enrichment to advance knowledge of students or to offer remedial instruction. It can also be used as an opportunity to preteach or reteach and review to strengthen skills. The fifth model is the Team Teach model. This model can be used when it is necessary to blend talent and expertise of both teachers and to foster interaction of students (Cook & Friend, 2010; Friend & Cook, 2003; Salend, 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Recently, Friend and Barron (2016) identified collaboration as one of the most important factors in effective coteaching. Viewing the interaction of coteaching as a professional relationship between teachers, the authors surmised that positive and lasting outcomes will come about as stakeholders focus on teacher preparation, administrative action, professional development, joint planning, and parity. These behaviors have been reiterated throughout the research. If these behaviors can be established, coteaching will continue to be beneficial to both teachers and students (Walther-Thomas, 1997) and play a vital role in preparing the general education classroom as the least restrictive environment. Regarding teacher efficacy in inclusion
classrooms, Chao et al. (2018) looked at the associated levels considered important to teachers. Results also identified collaboration as a key component.

**Instructional Time and Placement**

In providing an adequate milieu of learning, instructional time and placement are notable considerations. Studies with a focus on special education instructional time indicated that less than half of the day is spent on teaching, with a quarter of the time spent on tasks related to documentation, administration, and advising or seeking advice from other teachers or parents (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). In some instances, valuable instructional time is taken up to respond to behavioral issues in the classroom as shown by Cooc (2019), who addressed the issue in an endeavor to measure the amount of time teachers spend teaching in the classroom. Further, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) revealed data indicating that special education teachers spent more time teaching students in a setting other than the general education classroom.

Some researchers add an additional layer to the successfulness of teaching, alluding to the value of instructional methods over instructional placement (Holloway, 2001; Murawski & Dieker, 2004). Further, examining the concept of special education as a service rather than a place, Fore et al. (2008) argued that while there is no statistically significant evidence to indicate that students’ academic achievement varied based on inclusive versus non-inclusive placement, there was significant differences observed in participants enrolled in a general education class for literature compared to those who received their instruction in a special education setting, thus supporting the value of instructional methods over instructional placement.
**Key Players**

**The Educator**

In his 2013 text, Whitaker (2013) provides a plethora of descriptors identifying the attributes of “great teachers” in general. Listed is the ability to provide clear expectations in a classroom that is thoughtfully set up to manage behaviors. Also highlighted is the ability to establish high standards for all, while considering the needs of individual students. Moreover, Whitaker underscores the skills of empathy and relationship building. It can be argued that these attributes are associated with behaviors and attitudes, which are clearly seen as educators connect with the curriculum to make it accessible to all students (Whitaker, 2013).

While Whitaker’s text provides a description of “great” teachers in general, Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003) provide specific functions of a special education teacher: they establish a system to monitor student progress, give explicit and systematic instruction, and have an understanding of the implications of decisions made to improve learning in academic areas. In comparison, Vannest et al. (2011) identified the unique roles and responsibilities of a special educator by a set of specific codes: academic instruction; non-academic instruction; instructional support; preventative behavior management; responsive behavior management; special education state mandated, and classroom assessments; special education paperwork; and general education paperwork to provide a measurement of their worth. Others have included explicit instruction, communication, ethics, collaboration, differentiated instruction, and socio and behavioral supports as indicators for measurement (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Ritchey, 2011; Washburn-Moses, 2005; Woolf, 2015).

The drive for inclusive practices requires the special education teacher to become an essential part of the general education setting (Lerner & Johns, 2009; Murawski & Dieker,
The role and space of the special educator has evolved from a one classroom, self-contained, autonomous classroom leader to a collaborative, versatile, and dynamic manager of educational services while maintain the role of teacher (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Responsibilities vary with shifts in rules and regulations as well as student ability (Eisenman et al., 2011). Benedict et al. (2014) addressed the changing role of the special education teacher in light of changes in policy and regulations and the necessary skills needed to fulfill the expectations—expertise in assessments and data analysis used in school-wide screenings and tiered interventions along with rigorous lesson plans and the skill to deliver them. The article served to inform educators of ways to develop necessary skills to stay abreast of their changing roles.

*The Educational Leader*

The least restrictive environment need not be the general education classroom (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015), yet students with learning disabilities may still have access to the general education curriculum. It is the administrator’s responsibility to make available what is needed to meet statutory requirements (Darrow, 2016). As these are interpreted and applied at the district and building level, ideally, all students will have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful, challenging, and appropriate learning experience (Giangreco et al., 2012; Salend, 2016).

As change agents, school leaders have the influential power to create a climate that encourages teacher engagement in planning, instruction and discipline (Kowalski, 2010). Research has identified certain practices necessary for the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kowalski, 2010). Highly recommended is the practice of creating an environment allowing teachers to take risks without being overburdened with systematic procedures and restraints. Also important is the opportunity for teachers to participate in meaningful professional development and assessments pertaining to change and growth.
Recognizing the connection between teacher effectiveness and student academic performance work will guide school leaders to decisions that effect positive and lasting change (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kowalski, 2010). In addition, collaborative efforts among general and special education teachers will create the conditions to provide individualize instruction with the necessary supports for the student (Lerner & Johns, 2009). These collaborative efforts can be manifested through the delivery of a variety of instructional practices; however, it is the responsibility of the school administration to provide the necessary resources and supports to a sufficient number of qualified teachers so that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015; Michigan Department of Education-Office of Special Education [MDE-OSE], 2020).

Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support as a Means to Practice Inclusion

Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support are viable options for providing students with and without disabilities access the general education. Along with provisions set out in IDEA 2004, the language in the law aligned with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative provided the option to use Response to Intervention (RTI) to identify students at risk. This eliminated the need to use the discrepancy model and allowed the identification process to be more proactive (Brown & Skow, 2009; Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015; Lerner & Johns, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). Educational decisions are made based on the success or failure of at-risk students during specialized intervention.

RTI

Beginning with universal screening and the use of comprehensive learner assessments and diagnostic evaluations, implementation of RTI can continue the process of remediating
learning incongruencies by effecting the three-tiered system of interventions (Brown & Skow, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). The special education teacher is involved throughout the process of RTI serving as a deliverer of instruction at the intervention level as well as a source of reference when providing pertinent student data.

Early intervention becomes the basis for tier 1 since teachers in the general education setting use high-quality, evidence-based instruction to target the most effective ways students acquire knowledge. Progress monitoring takes place every 1-2 weeks for students struggling at this level. Students who do not make adequate progress receive tier 2 interventions, which is seen as additional evidence-based academic support given in the general education classroom. Tier 3 interventions are given to students who are not responding to tier 2 interventions. More evidence-based, intensive, and individualized instruction is given at this level. When students continue to fail to reach the benchmark, an evaluation team will collaboratively consider the potential need and benefit of special education for the student (Brown & Skow, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). Special educators are often used in the third tier of the process, where students are exposed to a higher degree of classroom interventions delivered in small groups within the general education classroom before being referred to be evaluated for special education services (Brown & Skow, 2009; Lerner & Johns, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). RTI provides an ideal platform to facilitate inclusion, since it comprises high-quality instruction, frequent progress monitoring, and data-based decision making (Brown & Skow, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). (See Figure 1.)
In 2015 the *Every Student Succeeds Act* was established to ensure that all students be held to high academic standards. This in turn called educators to a higher expectation regarding student outcomes. It also ensured that necessary supports and resources would be made available to improve education and postsecondary outcomes (Darrow, 2016). The mandate required annual testing in reading and math in Grades 3-8 and once in high school. Implications of ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) were seen as states developed a more comprehensive and integrated system of support, namely Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), to respond to the requirements. Hence, MTSS increased learner access to effective instructional practices.

**MTSS.** MTSS initiative comprises five essential components: a tiered delivery system; team-based leadership; continuous data-based decision making; a comprehensive screening; selection and implementation of instructions, interventions, and supports. (See Figure 2.) Related
to inclusion, MTSS supports instruction for the complete range of learners represented in a school by incorporating effective teaching and learning interventions, assessments, resources, professional learning, and system processes and protocols (MDE, 2019).

**Figure 2**

*Multi-Tiered System of Supports Framework*

(Adapted from Multi-Tiered System of Support Through the Lens of the Michigan Department of Education [MDE], 2019.)

The intervention and support component of MTSS encompasses the Positive Behavior Intervention Supports framework, a structure that focuses on effective student behavior for creating and sustaining safe and effective learning environments. As such, this social aspect addresses problem behaviors, development of pro-social skills, and the use of data-based problem solving for dealing with existing behavior concerns (MDE, 2018). MTSS is often
referred to as the umbrella under which Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) exists. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

*Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Umbrella*

Adapted from State Support Team 16, 2021.

Overall, MTSS envelops school culture and professional development sessions, curriculum design, PBIS, teacher learning and collaboration and collaboration between school and family in problem solving and intentionally interconnects the education, health, and human service systems in support of successful learners, schools, centers, and community outcomes (Burns et al., 2016; MDE, 2021b; Salend, 2016; Samuels, 2016). If inclusion is viewed as a “process through which education systems respond to diverse learners,” then MTSS plays a vital role in its implementation’ (Robinson, 2017, p. 164).
MTSS at the State Level

_Michigan’s Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MiMTSS)_

At the state level, MTSS combined with the Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MIBLSI) to form MiMTSS. This is an intensive technical assistance program that provides assistance to school districts implementing reading and behavior multi-tier system of supports (MDE, 2018, 2021b).

_MiMTSS Assessment Models_

States are required by law to assist districts and schools in demonstrating the use and effectiveness of instructional programs (Darrow, 2016; Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). The state provides a resource to meet the requirement. Michigan schools are encouraged to participate. The reading and behavior model uses a Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (R-TFI), which lists the core features of MTSS and helps schools develop and assess evidence-based practices used for improving student reading. This includes systems of continuum of supports for students, and data and evaluation for reading (MiMTSS, 2020). The R-TFIs are provided at two levels: School-wide Reading (elementary level) and Secondary Level Content Area Reading (secondary level) (MiMTSS, 2020). (See Tables 1 & 2.) An additional inventory for secondary students is used in conjunction with the R-TFI Secondary Level Content Area Reading Edition. (See Table 3.) The use of these six items is designed to supplement, not supplant, the existing screening items in the R-TFI Secondary-Level Edition scores.
### Table 1

**Sample of R-TFI Secondary-Level Edition Assessment Tier 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R-TFI item</th>
<th>Max points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.7 The school uses a formal procedure for selecting Content Area Reading Strategies to provide content area reading instruction</strong></td>
<td>Strategy alignment with the Big Ideas of Adolescent Literacy and state standards (word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, motivation). • Fit and alignment with other curricula and materials for content area reading instruction. • Quality evidence to demonstrate effectiveness with target population. • Inclusion of supports for English Language Learners (if school demographics include ELLs). • Available resources needed to fully implement. • Availability of professional learning and ongoing technical assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.8 An instructional routine is available for each content area reading strategy that has been adopted for use school-wide.</strong></td>
<td>The instructional routine for all content area reading strategies includes all of the following: • Clear and concise language. • New material is presented in small steps with student practice occurring after each step. • Teacher modeling. • Guided practice. • Frequent checking for understanding to obtain a high success rate. • Error correction procedures. • Scaffolding for difficult tasks. • Monitored independent practice. • Opportunities for cumulative and distributed review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.9 The school has a School-wide Content Area Reading Plan.</strong></td>
<td>The plan supports students’ mastery of the Big Ideas of Adolescent Literacy and state standards. -AND The plan is developed using all of the following data sources: • Early Warning Indicator data. • Historical data. • High-stakes summative data. • Fidelity data. -AND The plan includes specific activities to achieve the goals (e.g., scheduling, assessment, professional learning) that are embedded when possible into the school improvement plan. -AND The plan’s goals are S.M.A.R.T.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.10 Department Teams develop instructional plans to improve students’ understanding of the content area.</strong></td>
<td>Department Teams develop an instructional plan to include the following: • S.M.A.R.T. instructional goals that are aligned with the content area reading strategies. • Method for collecting strategy fidelity data (e.g., checklist, frequency data, rubric). • Differentiation of content area reading strategies to address students with a continuum of reading skills (e.g., grade-level, course, student’s reading skill).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.11 Class-wide expectations for student behavior are established and taught.</strong></td>
<td>Class-wide expectations are: • Clearly defined, using student appropriate language (e.g., Goals, Respect, Integrity, Team Work). • Stated positively. • Aligned with the schoolwide expectations. • Visibly posted in all classroom settings. • Taught at least annually and as needed (e.g., after breaks) as identified by behavioral data. • Embedded within feedback to students. -AND All classrooms establish and teach class-wide expectations.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1.12 Procedures are implemented for common classroom activities.</strong></td>
<td>All teachers (including paraeducators or aides) define and teach procedures for common classroom activities (e.g., transitions, signaling for student’s responses). -AND The procedures are posted using student-friendly language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revised from Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (Secondary-Level Edition) (St. Martin, Nantais, Harms, & Huth, 2015).
Table 2
Sample of R-TFI Secondary-Level Edition Assessment Tiers 2 & 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R-TFI item</th>
<th>Max points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5 The school uses a formal process for selecting evidence-based reading</td>
<td>The procedure looks for the presence of all of the following: • Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interventions.</td>
<td>alignment with the Big Ideas of Adolescent Literacy and state standards (word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, motivation). • Fit and alignment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with school-wide content area reading strategies. • Quality evidence to</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>demonstrate effectiveness of the intervention with the target population. •</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inclusion of explicit instructional routines. • Available resources needed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to fully implement. • Availability of professional learning and ongoing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>technical assistance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.6 The school uses a variety of data sources to design reading intervention plans.</td>
<td>The following types of data are reviewed to inform intervention plans: •</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student progress with previous intervention(s). • Data on previous</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intervention fidelity. • Reading diagnostic assessment(s). • Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assessment data (e.g., attendance, discipline referrals, Student Risk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Screening Scale).</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.7 Intervention groups include students with similar needs.</td>
<td>Intervention groups are determined based on both: • Intervention placement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>test results. • Intensity of student needs within the placement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.8 The school alters intervention variables to intensify reading</td>
<td>The potential impact of each of the following variables is addressed when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intervention supports.</td>
<td>intensifying reading intervention supports: • Increased instructional time.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Smaller group size. • Increased opportunities to respond with feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased explicitness of instruction. • Changing intervention program.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Changing intervention skill focus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.10 The school has identified an individual(s) to support the use of</td>
<td>The school has an individual(s) who does all of the following for reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading assessments for students with reading deficits.</td>
<td>assessments (e.g., progress monitoring, diagnostic): • Train appropriate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>staff in test administration and scoring procedures. • Provide administration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and scoring refresher trainings. • Schedule assessments. • Ensure accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of test administration, scoring, and entry. • Ensure teachers have access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to usable data reports. • Assist with data interpretation and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11 All staff providing reading interventions receive implementation</td>
<td>Personnel implementing interventions receive the following: • Training in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supports.</td>
<td>the use of the reading intervention program by an individual(s) who has both</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>expertise and demonstrated implementation success. • Access to a written</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>protocol for implementation. • Coaching support for implementation through</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>observation, modeling, coteaching, and feedback over time to ensure the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading intervention is implemented accurately and independently before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>implementation supports are faded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15 Staff collect diagnostic data with fidelity.</td>
<td>Diagnostic data (e.g., RIOT record reviews, interviews, observations, tests)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>are gathered when more in-depth information is needed to inform reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intervention plans. -AND Staff adhere to standard test administration and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>data collection protocols (e.g., RIOT).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revised from Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (Secondary-Level Edition) (St. Martin, Nantais, Harms, & Huth, 2015).
Table 3

Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory Reading Screening Items for Secondary Schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R-TFI item</th>
<th>Tier 1 resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.13 The school has identified an individual(s) to assist in data coordination for school-wide reading assessments.</td>
<td>The school has an individual(s) who does all of the following for school-wide reading assessments: • Train appropriate staff in test administration and scoring procedures. • Provide administration and scoring refresher trainings. • Schedule assessments. • Ensure teachers have access to usable data reports. • Ensure accuracy of test administration, scoring, and entry. • Assist with data interpretation and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.14 A school-wide reading universal screening assessment schedule is available for the current school year.</td>
<td>The following features are included on the school-wide reading universal screening assessment schedule: • Three universal screening assessments during the year. • Assessment windows are two weeks or less. • A list of the measures (aligned with the critical reading skills) administered at each grade level for each test period. • Deadline for data entry within one week after assessment administration (if needed).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.18 Universal screening assessments have been purposely selected.</td>
<td>There is documentation that the school or district procedure looked for the presence of all of the following criteria when selecting universal screening assessments for reading: • Assessments align with the Big Ideas of Reading. • High levels of technical adequacy as demonstrated by a scientifically vetted/peer reviewed process. • Resources necessary to use the assessment as intended (i.e., materials, training, loss of instructional time per student). • How assessment results are used to plan reading instruction such as current risk level and progress since previous test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.19 The school uses a data system(s) that allows access to universal screening assessment reports.</td>
<td>Data system(s) includes all of the following features: • Visual displays of schoolwide, sub-group, grade level, classroom, and individual student data. • Reports showing the percent of students at or above, below, and well below benchmark for critical skills at each grade-level, sub-group, and benchmark period. • Progress of groups of students and individual students between benchmark periods. • Progress of groups of students across school years. -AND Data are easily accessible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.20 Staff collect reading universal screening data with fidelity.</td>
<td>The school administers universal screening measures in reading to all students using grade level materials. -AND Staff adhere to standard administration and scoring protocols for the universal screening measure(s). -AND Staff participate in annual refresher training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.22 The School Leadership Team uses data to monitor the health of the School-wide Reading Model.</td>
<td>The School Leadership Team gathers and analyzes all of the following data to monitor the health of the school-wide reading system: • Percent of students who are low risk, some risk, and at risk for future reading difficulties. • Percent of students who are responding to reading intervention. • Percent of students who remain at low risk from one screening to the next. • Percent of students with reduced levels of risk from one screening period to the next. -AND The above data are analyzed and used to determine when problem solving is needed for all grades and intervention groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revised from Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory for secondary schools (St. Martin, Nantais, Harms, & Huth, 2020).
Prevalence of Districts using RTI and MTSS

It is interesting to note that in the school year 2017-2018, 34 out of 587 districts and 10 out of 56 Intermediate School Districts were recognized for their MTSS implementation based on ISD or district capacity, school-level fidelity, and student outcome data (Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative [MIBLSI], 2019). More recently in 2019, schools were recognized for their implementation of MTSS. A recognition criterion was used to highlight growth:

Two high schools received a Gold in Behavior - SWPBIS Total Score ≥ 70% and at least one of the following criteria: 1. ≤ National Median for major ODR/100/day rate 2. ≥ 80% SRSS Low Risk in spring on both the internalizing and externalizing scales 3. ≥ 10% annual increase in spring SRSS Low Risk on both the internalizing and externalizing scales;

Nineteen high schools received Silver in Behavior - SWPBIS Tier 1 Score ≥ 70% and at least one of the following criteria: 1. ≤ National 75th Percentile for major ODR/100/day rate 2. ≥ 80% SRSS Low Risk in spring on both the internalizing and externalizing scales 3. ≥ 10% annual increase in spring SRSS Low Risk on both the internalizing and externalizing scales;

Twelve high schools received Bronze in Behavior - SWPBIS Tier 1 Score ≥ 70%;

One high school received Bronze in Reading - R-TFI Tier 1 Score ≥ 80% (Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative, Version: 1.0 Date: April 2019).

Future Plans for MTSS

As MTSS continues to develop, the emphasis is on increasing local education authority support. The Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), an organization that provides resources in leadership development, collaborative structures, project management, and personnel support, is fully engaged in the implementation science behind MTSS (MAISA, 2021). In addition, the organization partnered with Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to support an initiative called Transformation Zone. This is designed to develop capacity and understanding in systems change. Through collaborative efforts districts,
Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic

How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect systems established to implement the goals and expectations of MTSS? Further, how does a teacher ensure that vulnerable children are receiving the attention they require?

State Guidance

In response to the COVID-19 (pandemic) restrictions placed on the education system in March 2020, the Michigan Department of Education issued guidelines for providing access to assistive technology for students at home (MDE, 2020a). Directed to the Local and Intermediate School District Directors of Special Education and Public School Academy Directors of Special Education, three recommendations were given: review IEPs to ensure access to assistive technology when the home setting becomes the school setting; assist staff in getting assistive technology to students as soon as possible; consider the accessibility of digital platforms including compatibility with assistive technology. Congruent to the issuance of the assistive technology guidelines, another recommendation was made to address the confusion of providing virtual or online learning (distant instruction). Many teachers assumed that federal disability law would deem distance learning unattainable during the national lockdown, but were reminded that through the provision of FAPE, school districts were obligated to provide instruction “virtually, online, or telephonically” (MDE-OSE, 2020).
Online Teaching

Research

Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) recognized the pandemic crisis as a *once in a century* laboratory for inquiry into situations unique to the COVID-19 crisis, and harnessed the opportunity to conduct a study identifying evidence-based policies and practices that would transform learning opportunities for all children. With school reform as the impetus, the focus was to look for ways to provide a more equitable learning environment for children. A meta-analysis of online studies revealed that providing tools and mechanisms to promote student reflection of their level of learning showed the strongest evidence of effectiveness. Also effective was asynchronous over synchronous distance education, which has spearheaded the modus operandum during the pandemic.

*Synchronous* and *asynchronous* are vocabulary words that have come to hold significant meaning when delivering instruction during the pandemic lockdown. Institutes of higher education, elementary, and secondary schools across the world have had no choice but to adjust to the changes (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2020; UNESCO, 2020). According to the *Oxford Popular Dictionary and Thesaurus*, *synchronous* is an adjective that means occurring or existing at the same time. A quick search on the internet revealed the same. However, the phrase *synchronous learning* refers to

all types of learning in which leaners and instructors are in the same place, at the same time, in order for leaning to take place. This includes in-person classes, live online meetings when the whole class or smaller groups get together. (Finol, 2020)

Likewise, *asynchronous* means two or more objects or events not existing or happening at the same time. When applied to the school setting, a quick search online revealed, “… not keeping time together, which refers to students’ ability to access information, demonstrate what
they’ve learned, and communicate with classmates and instructors on their own time …” (Trach, 2018).

Whether teaching synchronously or asynchronously, research demonstrates that either method is possible. To encourage student engagement during synchronous teaching, Çakiroğlu and Kiliç (2018) examined the use of gamification to increase involvement in online learning. New ways of using rewards, badges, levels, and reputation were developed to enhance the learning environment. Sobko et al. (2020) conducted a study that explores the challenge of making online courses engaging, critical, and inclusive educational spaces. Synchronous online engagement with multiple digital technologies were examined to develop a definition for collaborative online learning. Although a higher education research, the findings may be relevant to teaching and learning on a variety of online spaces.

Glenn (2018) and Cartner and Hallas (2020) conducted research highlighting different aspects of Asynchronous Teaching and Learning. Glenn (2018) focused on the importance of acknowledging differences in online and in-class student exposure, learning preferences and the need for human contact before endeavoring to implement an online classroom. In their 2020 study, Cartner and Hallas focused on the gap between technology use for teaching and learning and the technology used in assessment. Results of the study indicated the importance of aligning digital technology with course design outcomes, activities, and assessments; the relevance of content; and aligning course outcomes, activities, and assessment with multi-literacy skills.

Minkos and Gelbar (2020) used a trauma-informed lens to provide educators with recommendations on supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on providing practical advice in the areas of social-emotional well-being and academic learning. Using MTSS as the vehicle for service, the researchers advise that additional interventions be
established to address chronic stress and trauma that might be the experience of students who are at the tier 3 of MTSS. Highlighting the academic needs of students, Minkos and Gelbar (2020) stress the need to especially address the reading deficits students from low socio-economic status families will inevitably experience after an extended time away from the classroom. Assessments and identification are crucial components of providing interventions. The researchers acknowledge teacher dispositions critical to the success of teaching and learning during this time of change and uncertainty—"flexibility, adaptation, and dedication to their students’ well-being once schools reopen while also coping with their own personal stressors" (Minkos & Gelbar, 2020, p. 425).

In the meantime, as the pandemic continues the need for remote learning, many local education authorities (LEAs) struggle with the distribution of information technology resources to both teachers and students. Of great concern is the ability to keep in compliance with the IEP as it pertains to equity of access to supports and services. It may be seen that students who are not able to fully partake in the learning process because of lack of equipment or access to the internet will be hindered in their education outcomes. Ways to provide for FAPE and LRE under the jurisdiction of IDEA (2004) will be an ongoing concern until disparities while in a pandemic are addressed (Jameson et al., 2020).

**Creative and Collaborative Options**

However, there are classroom level practices in which special education teachers can engage and adapt to work collaboratively and creatively with general education teachers. Flipped classrooms are an option. In this type of learning students are introduced to the content while at home in their individual learning space and then interact with the content in the classroom while the teacher is present to scaffold the learning (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015). Research shows
that this type of learning is effective (Zainuddin & Perera, 2019). In their 2019 study that sought to establish whether the flipped-classroom setting would meet the basic psychological needs of the Self Determination Theory (competency, autonomy, and relatedness), Zainuddin and Perera (2019) discovered that students were more competent at handling online tasks and activities. Results also revealed peer interaction and autonomous learning skills improvement and further development in intrinsic motivation. As many schools adopt a hybrid learning schedule, the flipped classroom approach would be a consideration.

Alternatively, modifying the existing models of coteaching to meet the dynamic classroom of the COVID-19 era was recently described by high school coteachers (EdSurge, 2021). They explained the method; using Complementary Teach, one teacher provides technical support for remote learners. Using the model Station Teach, both teachers assign students to different stations based on the unit pretest along with results of informal observations made during instruction. Teachers use online assessments for students learning remotely. Both teachers work with separate groups. Remote students join the class through district authorized online platform. In-class students carry their devices to various stations to include remote students in the learning experience. Using Parallel Teach, teachers decide on who will teach the mini lesson. The group is then separated alphabetically by last name. The teachers should use online platform with each group to include remote learners in the learning experience and to conference with them at the end of the class. In addition, teachers should email or make available online take-home assignments (EdSurge, 2021).

Google Classroom is prolific in providing a platform for education instruction and learning. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became the key component for schools adopting online learning as a way to interact with technology. Recognizing the
importance of education systems to have capacity in interfacing with teaching methods, Heggart and Yoo (2018) conducted a study and identified four key concepts that influence the likelihood of success of a learning platform: ease of access, collaboration, student voice/agency and pace.

As school districts adjust to the changing tide of the pandemic, finding the best way to provide meaningful learning experiences for students will be a challenge. Embracing the diverse span of all students will create an even greater task. It will be necessary to provide adequate resources and support so that students receiving services can learn from the same meaningful, challenging, and appropriate curriculum delivered to their general education peers (Friend & Bursack, 2006; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Lerner & Johns, 2009). This will facilitate inclusion.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher reviewed the categories assigned to special education and the individual education program designed to teach students in special education. The section was followed by a review of laws and regulations that contextualize special education. Next, an explanation of the Least Restrictive Environment was provided as it is interpreted by the General Education Movement and the Inclusion Movement. The chapter then provided a closer look at inclusion in light of a multi-tiered system of supports and the impact of implementing inclusion in the classroom. The next section, Tools of the Trade, reviewed effective strategies that may be used by educators to implement inclusion and was followed by an outline of current state-level MTSS activities that assist educators in the implementation of inclusive practices. The chapter concluded with a review of state recommendations as they relate to instruction and the COVID-19 pandemic. A selection of applicable research and studies on online/virtual learning were addressed to highlight the challenges of maintaining equity and FAPE in the classroom as it changes to meet the demands of the pandemic.
The following chapter will begin by defining the research study using a phenomenological approach. It will address the challenges related to recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. An outline the data collection tools will be provided and a description of the steps to data analysis will follow. The chapter will conclude with a description of the ways reliability and validity were approached to ensure trustworthiness of data.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will begin by defining the research study using a phenomenological approach. It will address the challenges related to recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. An outline the data collection tools will be provided followed by a description of the ample population. Next, an account of the steps to data analysis will be provided. The chapter will conclude with a description of the ways reliability and validity were approached to ensure trustworthiness of data.

Phenomenology Research

Phenomenology is a research method that aggregates the individual lived experiences of a group of people to draw commonalities and discern the meaning that those individuals give to those lived experiences. It draws upon the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and education to describe the essence of lived phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The method was established by Edmond Husserl in the 20th century. Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, added the concepts of being there and interacting with one’s world to Husserl’s methodology. Van Manen (2014) adds to this, the idea that lived experiences are ordinary experiences lived out on a day-to-day basis. Thus, this phenomenological study explores the ways in which special educators use their time to respond to the demands of their job, describes how they report their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting, and ascribes meaning to their role. The research design captured how special education teachers use best practices to provide inclusion in the least restrictive environment. Specifically,
the study explored the types of supports provided to the general education teacher and those used to support students in inclusive settings. The results provide a meaningful context in which to understand how special education teachers operate and the value with which they give their work during a time of emergency and non-emergency (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Significance to Research**

In February 2020, the world was confronted with the effects of a pandemic that has not been seen since the Spanish Influenza of World War I. In response, communities across the globe reacted in the best way they knew how. This study does not aim to pass judgment on the perceived successes or exploit failures of organizations. Rather, it seeks to explore how teachers responded to the immense challenges of continuing to instruct, particularly during virtual learning (Yang, 2020).

Using a phenomenological approach combined with the constant comparative method, this study explores what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function. The purpose was three-fold: to depict the essence of the experience of using inclusive practices, to deliver an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent while providing opportunities for inclusion, and to convey a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special education teacher during a global pandemic. Findings may also be used to make informed decisions on the content and purpose of teacher preparatory material and professional development.

**Methodology**

All types of qualitative research are interested in the “hows” of meaning and human behavior, the primary goal being to uncover and interpret these meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) bring light to the essence of qualitative research suggesting
that it revolves around the relationship between the researcher and the participant. This research adopted a phenomenological approach using observations, semi-structured interviews, member check, and document review to explore what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function. By exploring thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, the researcher was able to explore the everyday experiences of the special education teacher engaged in inclusive practices (Van Manen, 2014).

**Positionality Statement**

The researcher worked in the K-12 classroom environment as an inclusion teacher at the middle school level for five years. Bracketing experiences gained during that period was necessary to demonstrate objectivity while working with participants. Reflexivity was used to create a margin around the point of view of participants and that of the researcher. In so doing, the researcher was able to communicate respect for the expertise each participant held and develop a deeper understanding of the essence of providing inclusive practices in high schools.

**Data Collection Tool: Observations**

**Observations**

Observations are a major data collecting tool in qualitative research. Conducting an observation incorporates systematic procedures to answer specific questions so that a phenomenon can be further explored. For the current study, observations were conducted to provide reference points for subsequent interviews. Angrosino (2007), as stated in Creswell and Poth (2018), explained that the phenomenon is observed as the observer uses all the sense while in the field setting. In contrast, the current study did not provide the opportunity to observe in the field; however, as a method for triangulation, observation data were used with other forms of data to confirm emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Procedure

The study used qualitative research by collecting data from virtual classroom observations of five teachers. Observations were conducted before each interview on two separate occasions, to develop a rich understanding of how special education teachers make meaning of their time. Under the restraints of COVID-19, all observations were conducted virtually and were recorded by participants using GoReact, Google Classroom, or YouTube. Restrictions on in-person interactions required the researcher to assume the role of complete observer during observations (Gold, 1958).

Observations were recorded wherever the participant implemented their instruction. Recordings were submitted to the researcher. The researcher used a checklist to capture activities in which the special education teacher engaged throughout the period of time observed. The observation checklist assisted the researcher in determining how special education teachers spend their professional time on a daily basis at five different locations. Results from each observation were discussed during the following interview.

Data Collection Tool: Interviews

Interviews

Patton (2002) states that the purpose of the interview is to gain access to the thoughts and feelings of another; to essentially to take on another’s perspective. Put another way, the soft skill of empathy is useful when gathering data through conversation. This was achieved by adopting the social constructivism approach to inquiry as the researcher applied an inductive method to draw out emergent ideas (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Procedure

Interviews were conducted on two separate occasions using Zoom for ease of access to participants. These were audio recorded using a tape recorder, with a phone as back up and transcribed into a Word document using Office Dictation shortly after each interview. The researcher also took notes. The time was monitored to keep within 45 minutes to respect the interviewee’s personal time. Each interview began with a brief introduction of the researcher and a review of contents of the consent document, paying particular attention to confidentiality and providing the opportunity to ask questions. Some research questions were broad and open-ended, initially to gain demographic information, then to set the stage to ask questions that required participants to consider more deeply their responses (Charmaz, 2014; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Tisdell, 2003). This type of structure allowed the participant to define the phenomenon in unique ways, while being guided by questions that explore the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the end of the interview, additional questions were asked pertaining to the most recent observation. A constant comparison analysis was used to uncover themes and patterns from each interview (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). (See Appendix J.) The language of each question varied slightly depending on the response of each participant to encourage deep and relevant engagement (Borer & Fontana, 2012; Charmaz, 2014). Using a researcher’s notebook, memos were written to note verbal cues, extraneous words, and utterances to capture additional details. Transcripts were documented verbatim once the interview was completed (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The researcher went through each document, numbering the lines so that phrases and statement could be easily located. Questions were bolded and words and phrases significant to the research questions were highlighted
Data collection and data analysis were carried out simultaneously since preliminary data analysis began at the end of each interview. Composite textural and structural descriptions were written to capture unique ways participants defined the phenomenon of implementing inclusion under challenging circumstances using a thematic portrayal as a guide (Moustakas, 1994). (See Appendix O.)

**Data Collection Tool: Documentation Review**

**Documentation Review**

Denzin (1970) referred to documentation review as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (p. 291). Similarly, documentation review is an effective form of triangulation because it provides “a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). Furthermore, Patton (2002) and Bowen (2009) inform that different forms of data collection reduce the risk of bias interpretations and strengthens the findings. Consequently, the research study included documentation review to strengthen validity by appraising and synthesizing the data into the analysis of the study (Labuschagne, 2003).

**Procedure**

After each interview took place, the researcher reviewed online information provided by the school district and aligned information with state guidelines on academic supports provided in the general education setting, academic supports provided for students receiving services, and academic and emotional supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coding and theming documents took place and memos were written after each document was analyzed. Triangulation by using multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods supported the ability to confirm emerging findings (Denzin, 1970; Eisner, 1991; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002).
The following documents were reviewed pertaining to academic supports in the general education setting: MiMTSS Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory Reading Screening Items for Secondary Schools and Secondary Edition, Tiers 1, 2, and 3. (See Tables 1, 2, & 3.)

Based on the evaluation criteria of the MiMTSS assessment models (MIBLSI, 2020), the researcher compared the observed behaviors with documented guidance.

The following document was reviewed pertaining to academic supports for students receiving services: The Path Forward Strategic Action Plan (MDE, 2020c). Dove-tailing into the requirements established to meet the ESSA 2015 mandate, in 2018 the U.S. Department of Education issued a statement addressing Michigan’s ineffectiveness in meeting the requirements of IDEA Part B. As a result, the Michigan Department of Education developed an action plan to provide interventions and remedy the situation. A written document, The Path Forward Strategic Action Plan (MDE, 2020c), identified specific outcomes based on three phases, and a timeline provided deadlines. Specific to the study, Phase One indicated implementation of alternative paths to diplomas for students with disabilities, personal curriculums 2.0, statewide coordinated and aligned professional development for general and special educators regarding personal curriculum quality, drop-out coding, data driven decision making on instruction improvements, and Tier 1 instruction for inclusive practices. The deadline stated for these outcomes was June 2021. Phase Two indicated implementation of additional supports for MTSS and PBIS, investigation into alternative ways to test and assess student knowledge on statewide assessments, and wrap-around system work aimed at the whole child. The deadline stated for these outcomes was June 2022. Phase Three indicated implementation of work groups for special education teacher certification and National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) focused assessment training in addition to accountability of technology use.
The following documents were reviewed pertaining to COVID-19 pandemic procedures:


On June 30, 2020, Governor Whitmer issued Executive Order 2020-142 requiring every school district and nonpublic school to develop and adopt a COVID-19 preparedness and response plan (“Preparedness Plan”) informed by the **Michigan Return to School Roadmap** (Michigan.gov, 2020c). (See Appendix Q.) Concurrently, MDE-OSE developed guidance to support the return to school for students with IEPs ages three to 26 during the pandemic regarding in-person instruction:

a. In-person instruction: Districts should follow recommended guidelines of the Return to School Roadmap, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and/or local health departments, as well as any further executive orders or legislation, when considering whether to resume in-person instruction, including conducting evaluations and observations of students. (MDE-OSE, 2020)

Also, MDE-OSE (2020) strongly recommended districts’ use of the contingency learning plan as a process to support districts and families in planning through the uncertainties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

School districts developed initiatives to reflect the directives found in the **Michigan Safe Schools Roadmap** (Michigan.gov, 2020b). Schools provided weekly reports on cases and procedures for notifying anyone coming into contact with those who have tested positive for COVID-19. Parents, staff and students were encouraged to wear a cloth face covering or mask when in close proximity with others, practice frequent hand washing, stay home when sick, and continue to screen for potential symptoms of illness before coming school each day.
The Constant Comparative Method of Data Collection

The constant comparative method was used to identify patterns in the data by comparing data from the second interview to data from the first interview, having pulled out themes from the first interview (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). These themes were looked at again in light of the themes uncovered from the second interview and a comparison was made between the two sets of themes. As connections were made between the two, this connection was identified as a new theme and then compared to the data of the third interview, using the same cycle until all the interviews were analyzed, thus creating a constant comparison of all the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

The researcher looked to several authors to gain an understanding of how to combine the constant comparative method of data collection with the phenomenological approach of analyzing and presenting the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2016; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Consequently, data analysis and representation took place by managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations to form textural and structural descriptions, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2016; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

Data Collection Planning: Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB)

Before conducting the research, the researcher gained permission from the Western Michigan University (WMU) HSIRB. Participants were provided with pertinent information regarding the research. Respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice are three principles guiding the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time and assured that no foreseeable risks or costs would be
accrued other than the cost of time. They were also assured that in keeping with the confidentiality of the HSIRB at WMU, names of participants would not be divulged. In keeping with the protocol of WMU, participants were informed of the benefit of participating in the research, that findings would have the potential to improve instructional practices and inform decision makers as they structure the workforce to operate more efficiently. In addition, findings would also assist in the decision-making process of stakeholders regarding the purpose and content of teacher preparation materials and professional development. It was the intent of the researcher to conduct the study in such a way as to acknowledge the situational and relational nature of ethical dilemmas and address them with respect and sensitivity as they arise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). (See Appendix A.)

**Recruitment and Selection of Study Participants**

Between 1976 and 2004, the percentage of total public-school enrollment in buildings receiving federal funding for special education programs increased from 8.3% to 13.8%. Much of this overall increase was attributed to a rise in the percentage of students identified with Specific Learning Disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Also on the rise was the percentage of children identified with Other Health Impairments, such as asthma, ADD, ADHD, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, or hemophilia (MARSE, R 340.1709a; MDE, 2021a). Numbers rose from 1.1 to 1.8% of total public-school enrollment. At this time, the percentage of students with autism rose from 0.4 to 1.2% and a slight increase was seen in the percentage developmental delayed identification, from 0.7 to 0.9% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). By 2015-2016, the number for all disabilities settled at 13.2% of total student enrollment. This amounted to 6,677,000 school children identified for special education out of a total enrollment of
43,906,333 students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Statistical data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2020) as of May 2019 indicated that the national level of all special education teachers was 447,770. Of that number, 13,260 represented those teaching at the preschool level, 188,810 at the kindergarten–elementary level, and 137,330 at the secondary level. Of those employed at the secondary level, 1,880 special education teachers held Michigan issued certifications.

Population

This study focused on how special education teachers spent their time by exploring daily responsibilities in districts within a defined boundary in Southwest Michigan. The population for this study was secondary special education teachers who provide inclusion to access the general education curriculum. The research took place as the pandemic changed the scenery of the classroom. Observations and interviews were conducted during the complete remote to hybrid learning phases of the COVID-19 crisis.

Sampling Strategy and Numbers

While the study addressed the behaviors and distribution of work time in the day of special education teacher, the selection criteria for this study was restricted to the high school secondary level to examine how special education teachers carry out their duties in tandem with general education teachers while meeting the educational, emotional, and social demands of this specific student population. Nonprobability was the sample of choice for this study since the purpose of the research was not to generalize results of the study to the population but to explore a specific group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Purposeful sampling refers to the selection of specific sites, participants, and sample size to be studied and how that might assist the researcher in uncovering meaning from a sample that
best suits the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2002) refers to nonprobability sampling as information rich, indicating its value in providing opportunities to learn a great deal about a specific phenomenon. Consequently, criterion-based selection is reflected in the choice of the sampling strategy. Thus, the sampling for this study represented a homogenous population. According to Polkinghorne (1989), interviewees should number between 5 and 25. Schneider and Whitehead (2013) informed that “small sample sizes are far more manageable because of the amount of potentially rich and detailed data that sample size in qualitative research can generate from each participant” (p. 7). In the case of the current study, the sample consisted of five secondary special education teachers who work with the general education teacher to provide services to students with learning disabilities.

**Subject Recruitment**

Recruitment took place in areas that were identified as suburb, town, and rural. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides geographic data to define areas in the U.S. territory. These areas are referred to as locales and are identified as city, suburban, town, and rural (Geverdt, 2015). Based on these definitions, locales are delineated on the grounds of size of population when examining city and suburb school districts, but distance from urban centers when considering rural districts. (See Table 4.) Participants were high school special education teachers from various school districts surrounding the Southwest Michigan region. School district areas associated with each participant were identified as suburban, town, or rural. (See Table 5.) Participants were identified by descriptors as found in Table 6.
### Table 4

*Recruitment Locale Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb descriptor (differentiated by size)</th>
<th>Suburb description and population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midsize</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town descriptor (differentiated by proximity)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural descriptor (differentiated by proximity)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program (EDGE) Locale Boundaries User’s Manual (n.d.).
Table 5

Location of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As school districts responded to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, it became increasingly difficult to recruit participants. Schedules were in a constant flux and many teachers were reluctant to add to their already mounting tasks. However, the researcher received agreement from the Director of Special Education for two school districts where two participants were recruited. The following criteria were used:

1. High school special education teacher;
2. Cotaught for 3 years or more;
3. Work in the inclusive setting;
4. Recommended by Special Education Director/Supervisor to participant in study based on their coteaching experience in inclusive setting.
### Table 6

**Participant Demographic Data Collection for Phenomenology Study on Understanding the Unique Role of the Special Education Teacher and the Essence of the Special Education Teacher’s Life in the Inclusive Settings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Case-load students</th>
<th>Highest level of attainment</th>
<th>Other qualifications</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Years in current position</th>
<th>Years in inclusive practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Masters in Special Education</td>
<td>Nonviolent/ Crisis intervention training</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Masters in Special Education</td>
<td>LD HQ in Social Studies, History, &amp; ELA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Masters In Special Education Administration with Principal Certificate</td>
<td>Can teach K-8 math EL endorsement</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Masters in Ed leadership - K12 principalship currently working on Masters In Special Education Administration</td>
<td>CPI Instructor EI Endorsement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Masters in Special Education</td>
<td>LINKS Coordinator Early Childhood endorsement</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An email was sent to teachers who were identified as high school special education teachers. (See Appendix D.) The email informed teachers of the details of the research study, the intent of the interview, the benefits to them as participants, and the ways in which their profession may be improved by their input. Teachers were reminded that participation is optional, and should they decide to partake in the study, they would be free to stop at any time in the process. The remaining three were recruited on the basis of their effective and highly effective teacher evaluation ratings and exemplary higher education student performance. (See Table 7.)

Table 7

Recruitment Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Supervisor recommendation</th>
<th>Professor recommendation</th>
<th>Effective rating</th>
<th>Highly effective rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

University professors were approached, requesting recommendations of teachers who had attended and successfully completed special education graduate classes. An email was sent to teachers informing them of the details of the research study, the intent of the interview, the benefits to them as participants, and the ways in which their profession may be improved by their input. Teachers were reminded that participation is optional, and should they decide to partake in the study, they would be free to stop at any time in the process. (See Appendix A.)
Participants

Demographics of participants were documented to notate group diversity. (See Table 6.)

The following questions were asked of each participant:

1. Please share a little about the path that has led you to this point in your career.
2. How would you describe your role as a special education teacher in your current capacity?
3. What do you find works best when working in an inclusive setting?
4. The way of educating students has drastically changed in recent months. How have you managed to meet the requirements of your job as a special education teacher in light of COVID-19?
5. What do you think students benefit the most from by receiving their instruction in an inclusive setting?
6. What kind of culture is needed to facilitate inclusion?
7. How do you establish a working relationship with the teacher(s) to facilitate a classroom climate that is conducive to inclusive learning?
8. How do your services differ from that of the general education teacher?
9. In what ways do you adjust your teaching to meet the requirements of RTI and MTSS while continuing to provide services to students on your caseload?
10. What are some of the difficult situations you find yourself in when working with the general education teacher?
11. Describe a situation where it was necessary for you to advocate for a student on your caseload.
12. What do you find yourself doing that you feel is of little value to the overall well-being
   a. of your students?
   b. of you?
13. What do you find yourself doing that you wish you could do more of?
14. How do you see special education evolving in the next five years?
15. If you could influence the course of special education, what policy would you introduce/eliminate?

Wrap Up Interview Questions
1. Assessing the amount of time in your day, what would you say are your main activities throughout a given week?
2. Of all the strategies you use, what do you find to be the one you keep coming back to?
3. At what point in your career did you feel comfortable with the way you interact with students and teachers?
4. Now that you know what you know, what teaching advice would you give your young self?
5. May I ask, have you ever been rated as highly effective in any of your teacher evaluations?

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2014) attested that the researcher is the first tool of data analysis. Saldaña (2016) informed that “the coding process has an ongoing interrelationship with analytic memo writing.” To conduct the data analysis for the current study, the researcher created
individual digital folders that contained data on each participant. Names were deleted and replaced with an identification code for each participant. Analytical memoing was documented, reorganized, and integrated into textural and structural descriptions. The results were presented in the final report. (See Appendices J–O.)

**Procedure for the Constant Comparative Method of Data Analysis**

**First Cycle of Data Analysis**

The researcher created open coding as the first stage of data analysis of the constant-comparative method. Observations, interviews, and documents regarding strategies, responsibilities, descriptions of interaction with general education teachers and state directives were documented after each encounter. Process coding (gerunds) and in vivo coding were used to capture evocative analytical memo writing about the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2016). (See Appendices J and K.)

**Second Cycle of Data Analysis**

Axial, theoretical, and selective coding are considered second cycle methods (Saldaña, 2016). Selective codings were created as the researcher made connections between a category and its subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Reoccurring words noted from process coding and were color-coded as themes began to emerge. Data were revisited after each encounter with participants to identify consistencies and inconsistencies of behavior, actions, and ideas. In addition, causal conditions leading to behavior, actions, and ideas were noted. Core categories were developed. (See Appendices L and M.)

The researcher clustered the core categories from the results of the selective coding to match the research questions, continuing to look back on the in vivo text to create a Thematic Portrayal. (See Appendix O.)
Creswell and Poth (2018) outline five steps to phenomenological data analysis and representation:

1. Manage and organize the data,
2. Read and memo emergent ideas,
3. Describe and classify codes into themes,
4. Developing and assess interpretations, and
5. Represent and visualize the data.

**Procedure for Phenomenology Data Analysis**

From the axial/selective code phrase of the constant comparative method,

1. Sentences and paragraphs were highlighted and grouped together under a theme code (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). This was also based on the concept of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), which describes the researcher’s actions to generate themes by developing and assessing interpretations through significant statements, sentences, and quotes.

2. Significant statements were clustered and grouped into meaning units.

3. Themed clustered sentences and paragraphs were matched to appropriate research questions to create a thematic portrayal using verbatim excerpts, as the researcher continued to look back on the in vivo text (Moustakas, 1994). (See Appendix N.) Representing and visualizing the data was achieved by creating and using textual descriptions—description of what happens, of the phenomenon (the meaning) individuals have experienced, and structural descriptions—description of how the phenomenon is experienced by individuals to emphasize the phenomenon of teaching.
inclusive practices as experienced by high school special education teachers. These descriptions are included in Chapter IV of the study.

Emerging themes were: Role, Responsibilities, and Duties; Interactions with Students and Teachers; Challenges; Inclusive Practices; Unique Qualities; and COVID–19 Pandemic.

**Themes Summary**

While conducting a comparative analysis of data collection from observations, interviews, and document review, the researcher engaged in analytical memoing to create open coding and axial coding/selective coding. The developing themes were: Roles and Responsibilities & Duties, Students, Relationships, Challenges, and COVID-19 Pandemic.

These themes were looked at further to present a thematic portrayal of teachers’ engagement. As the researcher continued the process of data analysis using a phenomenological approach, the themes Students, Challenges, and Relationships appeared to pervade the remaining themes and were later incorporated into the final themes of:

- Roles (one’s position on a team of educators) and
- Responsibilities & Duties (Tasks and duties of the role),
- Interactions,
- Inclusive Practices,
- Unique Qualities, and

Subthemes developed under Roles and Responsibilities & Duties. These were Knowing Students, Teaching Students, Sharing Knowledge, Providing Academic Support (dispositions and mindset), Providing Teacher Support (dispositions and mindset) IEP, and IEP Caseload Management. As data analysis continued, it became evident to the researcher that the remaining
themes (Interactions, Inclusive Practices, Unique Qualities, Impact of COVID-19) shared the same subthemes as Roles and Responsibilities & Duties. All the major themes identified at this point of the study were interconnected with each other. For instance, Interactions were evident as teachers performed their responsibilities and duties. Interactions were also identified as teachers talked about their roles. In the same way, the role of the teacher emerged as discussion took place around interactions with the general education teacher. Data revealed that these major themes were prevalent throughout the phenomenon of teachers implementing inclusion. (See Table 8.)

**Reliability and Validity of Study**

Multiple data collection methods were used to triangulate data and add validity and trustworthiness to emerging findings through themes and patterns (Denzin, 1970; Eisner, 1991; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). Through the use of a reflexive research journal, the researcher recorded how decisions were made throughout the project based on questions asked, obstacles overcome, and reflections (Ezzy, 2002, as cited in Saldaña, 2016, p. 38; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Sequence in Data Analysis.** Initially the constant comparative method of data analysis was adopted to become familiar with the data and interpret “meanings of the data from the data collected” (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002 p. 62). It formed a way to document changes in data before applying the lens of phenomenology. Textural and structural descriptions were written (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure trustworthiness of data, the member check procedure was used whereby the researcher invited each participant to review initial codes and developing themes from transcriptions and observation summaries (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba,
After reviewing of data, all participants replied, “Approved.”

Table 8

Major Themes, Subthemes, and Demonstration of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Demonstration of Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Roles as viewed as one’s position on a team of educators         | Teaching students as a special education teacher | • Providing academic support  
|                                                                 |                                               | • IEP implementation                                                                  |
|                                                                 | • Interactions                                | • Providing socioemotional support  
|                                                                 | • Inclusive practices                         | • Providing appropriate learning environment conducive to transition and postsecondary (curriculum content and schedules)  
|                                                                 | • Unique qualities                            | • Advocacy                                                                             |
|                                                                 | • COVID-19 crisis                             | • IEP implementation                                                                  |
|                                                                 | Demonstrating a breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students |                                                                                       |
|                                                                 | Sharing knowledge                             | • Providing teacher support  
|                                                                 |                                               | • Understanding the IEP                                                               |
| Responsibilities and duties as high school special education inclusion teacher | Providing academic support                   | • MTSS/RTI  
|                                                                 |                                               | • Small group  
|                                                                 |                                               | • instruction  
|                                                                 |                                               | • Coteaching                                                                          |
|                                                                 | Providing teacher support                     | • Sharing knowledge/  
|                                                                 |                                               | • information  
|                                                                 |                                               | • Data collection/ assessing students  
|                                                                 |                                               | • Collaboration, communication and parity                                             |
|                                                                 | Managing IEP caseload                         |                                                                                       |

Summary

This chapter defined the research study using a phenomenological approach. It addressed the challenges related to recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. An outline of the data collection tools was provided followed by a description of the ample population. Next, an account of the steps to data analysis was provided. The chapter concluded with a description of the ways reliability and validity were approached to ensure trustworthiness of data.

The following chapter will provide the results of a phenomenological research investigating the experience of teachers’ use of inclusive practices. The chapter will include a description of the study participants, the outcomes of the study by answering five main research questions through virtual interviews, virtual observations, document review, and a summary of the findings.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The chapter provides the results of a phenomenological research investigating the experience of teachers’ use of inclusive practices. The research provides insight into the experience of high school inclusion special education teachers while implementing inclusion during the height of a global pandemic. The chapter includes a description of the study participants, the outcomes of the study by answering five main research questions through virtual interviews, virtual observations, and document review, followed by a summary of the findings.

Participant Demographics

During the months of December 2020 to March 2021, five special education teachers were invited to participate in the study. Two were female and three were male. Teachers came from different school districts. For confidentiality purposes teachers were coded using the letter P and a number to identify the teacher (P1, P2, P3, P4, or P5) and a letter to identify the high school (A, B, C, D, or E). (See Tables 9 and 10.)

Table 9
Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ demographics</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Special educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants (N = 5)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of participants</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10

*Racial Distribution of Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial group</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Multi-racial</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaskan</th>
<th>Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>.01%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.02%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School A**

School A is in a setting described as a fringe town situated Southwest Michigan, along the Kalamazoo River with 30 full-time teachers. Total number of students enrolled is 679. Student-teacher ratio is 23:1. School A is ranked 152nd within Michigan. Advanced placement for students is 36%. School A has a 94% graduation rate (above state median) and scored 26.2/100 on the College Readiness Index, which represents the proportion of 12th graders who took and passed at least one AP or IB exam. Total minority enrollment is 9%. Thirty percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Twenty-four percent of the student population receive a free lunch and 6% receive a reduced lunch (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021). (See Table 11.) Student racial distribution was stated as 91% White, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2% Two or More Races, 1% Black, .4% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021).
Table 11

Students’ Eligibility for Free or Reduced Lunch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Eligible for free lunch</th>
<th>Eligible for reduced lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participating Teacher

P1 was a female Caucasian in the 46-55 age range. She had 28 students on her caseload. She worked for 27 years in teaching, with 22 years involved in inclusive practices. The last 12 years have been in her current position as a special education teacher. Her highest level of attainment was a master’s in special education. She had additional qualifications in nonviolent and crisis intervention training. P1 was a leader in the Level 3 ASD program, LINKS, which was introduced to the district three years ago (Ziegler & Schoemer, 1999). The program takes place in general education classrooms and creates the opportunity for special educators to provide a system of support for teachers and students as inclusion takes place in the general education setting.

P1 described her major role as that of a problem solver between the general and special education teachers. She identified this role as a liaison officer and was clear in communicating her philosophy on inclusion: “They’re all of our kids. They’re all Gen Ed kids first. I’m just here to help you help the kids.” She placed value on communication built on trust and recognized the value of collaborating with general education teachers and other staff members to maximize
effective teaching. P1 demonstrated a passion for helping students recognize their potential to achieve success in high school by helping them to earn a high school diploma and develop skills to equip them for postsecondary life.

**School B**

School B is in a Michigan city described as a mid-size suburb midway between Chicago and Detroit with 82 full-time teachers. Total number of students enrolled is 1,722. Student-teacher ratio is 23:1. School B is ranked 210th within the state of Michigan. Advanced placement for students is 57%. School B has an 89% graduation rate (below state median) and scored 32.2/100 on the College Readiness Index, which represents the proportion of 12th graders who took and passed at least one AP or IB exam. Total minority enrollment is 66%. Sixty-five percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Fifty-nine percent of the student population receive a free lunch and 6% receive a reduced lunch (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021). (See Table 11.) The student racial distribution was stated as 47% Black, 34% White, 10% Hispanic, 7% Two or More Races, 2% Asian, .01% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021).

**Participating Teacher**

P2 was a male Caucasian in the 36-45 age range. He had 21 students on his caseload. He worked for 14 years in teaching, with 14 years involved in inclusive practices. The last 7 years have been in his current position as a special education teacher. His highest level of attainment was a master’s in special education. He had an endorsement in Learning Disabilities and was highly qualified in Social Studies, History, and English Language Arts. P2 was an 8th grade history and social studies teacher before earning a special education teacher’s degree. He
considers himself a team social studies teacher and communicates this to all the teachers with whom he works. Being honest and following through with decisions and commitments are key to interacting successfully with teachers. P2’s philosophy is based on the assumption that both teachers “really lend support to the students who need it and they don’t know who’s who and who’s what.” Participant 2 seeks to be the 5% of the teaching equation so that students recognize that each adult is a teacher when there are two teachers in the classroom. P2 most recently took a Transitions class on finding meaningful employment for students to allow him to increase his skills in administering work and personality assessments to prepare students for transitioning to post education.

School C

School C is in a small city, described as fringe rural, situated in Southwestern Michigan, lying between Detroit and Chicago, with 32 full-time teachers. Total number of students enrolled is 739. Student-teacher ratio is 23:1. School C is ranked 457th within Michigan. Advanced placement for students is 36%. School C has a 91% graduation rate (close to state median) and scored 12.1/100 on the College Readiness Index, which represents the proportion of 12th graders who took and passed at least one AP or IB exam. Total minority enrollment is 19%. Forty-three percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Thirty-seven percent of the student population receive a free lunch and 5% receive a reduced lunch (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021). (See Table 11.) Student racial distribution is stated as 81% White, 6% Two or More Races, 5% Black, 5% Hispanic, 1% American Indian/Alaskan, 1% Asian, and .3% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021).
**Participating Teacher**

P3 was a male Caucasian in the 25-35 age range. He had 19 students on his caseload. He worked 9 years in teaching, which is his current position, with 9 years involved in inclusive practices. His highest level of attainment was a master’s degree in special education administration with a K-12 principalship endorsement. He was also qualified to teach K-8 math in the general education classroom. Participant 3 provided academic support in math in the resource room. P3 described his teaching philosophy as “Pretty laid back,” referring to teaching in the classroom presently; he explained:

If they want us to use Zoom, I’ll use Zoom. If they want us to use Google Classroom, I’ll use Google Classroom. Whatever they want us [to do] … I just do what I have to do. I don’t really think about it much. It’s almost like, coach is asking you to run 20 miles, you go for 20 miles. You don’t have another option.

He demonstrated a connection with students through his commitment to sports and communicated his passion to provide students with structure and routine to maximize their potential to learn saying, “I wish I could take them [his students] all home because I feel like if they had some more structure at home it would help them.”

**School D**

School D is in an area located in the center of the southern border of Michigan, described as a distant town with 37 full-time teachers. Total number of students enrolled is 888. Student-teacher ratio is 24:1. School D is ranked 203rd within Michigan. Advanced placement for students is 23%. School D has a 78% graduation rate (well below state median) and scored 19.7/100 on the College Readiness Index, which represents the proportion of 12th graders who took and passed at least one AP or IB exam. Total minority enrollment is 12%. Fifty percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Forty-six percent of the student population receive a free lunch and 4% receive a reduced lunch (Michigan’s Center for Educational
The student racial distribution was stated as 88% White, 9% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% Two or More Races, .02% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021).

**Participating Teacher**

P4 was a male Caucasian in the 25-35 age range. He had 16 students on his caseload. He worked for 7 years in teaching, with 5 years involved in inclusive practices. The past 7 years have been in his current position. His highest level of attainment was a master’s in educational leadership with a K-12 Principalship endorsement and he was working toward a second master’s degree in special education administration. He had an endorsement in emotional impairments and was a Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) instructor. He also taught an affective education class known as Aggression Replacement Training to students identified with emotional impairments. P4 supervised the peer-to-peer mentoring group LINKS to provide the opportunity for connections to be made between students in general and special education (Ziegler & Schoemer, 1999). P4 viewed his role as that of a consultant to those who coteach since he is not directly in general education classes with his students. His philosophy for what he does is to be of help to others. P4 demonstrated his passion for helping students succeed in the general education classroom by orchestrating schedules to ensure they would receive training focused on explicit instruction to develop healthy emotional behaviors and to set a positive tone for the rest of the day.

**School E**

School E is situated in southwestern Lower Michigan in an area described as a fringe town with 18 full-time teachers. Total number of students enrolled is 348. Student-teacher ratio
School E is ranked 152nd within Michigan. Advanced placement for student is 36%. School E has a 97% graduation rate (well above state median) and has a 0.0/100 on the College Readiness Index, which represents the proportion of 12th graders who took and passed at least one AP or IB exam. Total minority enrollment is 52%. Seventy-eight percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Seventy percent of the student population receive a free lunch and 8% receive a reduced lunch (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021). (See Table 11.) The student racial distribution was stated as 48% White, 45% Hispanic, 3% Two or More Races, 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% Asian, 1% Black, and 0% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2020; U.S. News, 2021).

**Participating Teacher**

P5 was a female Caucasian in the 36-45 age range. She had 13 students on her caseload. She worked for 14 years in teaching and 9 years in her current position, which was in inclusion. Her highest level of attainment was a master’s degree in special education. She had an endorsement in early education and was the LINKS coordinator of her building (Ziegler & Schoemer, 1999). P5 was a member of the district Transition Council. Her philosophy for teaching is to collaborate as much as possible and remain “very flexible.” In her goal to see students succeed, she determined to model anything the students are required to do, to create an example and a tool for teaching. P5 has taken on the role of developing strategies for children who “don’t catch onto things so easily or struggle with behaviors.” P5’s passion was demonstrated in her desire to understand “students with difficult behaviors or learning difficulties.”
Summary of Participant Demographics

The data show all five participants holding a master’s degree. Four participants (P1, P2, P3, and P5) hold a master’s degree in special education. One participant (P4) holds a master’s degree in education leadership with a K-12 Principalship certification. P4 is working toward a master’s degree in special education. Two participants (P3 and P4) hold endorsements in emotional impairment. One participant (P2) has an endorsement in learning disabilities. Three participants (P1, P4, and P5) are coordinators for the social program LINKS. Of those three participants, two (P1 and P4) are qualified in crisis prevention or crisis intervention. Two participants (P2 and P3) stated that they were highly qualified in subject areas, one (P2) in social studies, history, and ELA, and the other (P3) in math. (See Table 12.)

Table 12

Participants’ Credential Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Highest level of attainment</th>
<th>Other qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Master’s in Special Education</td>
<td>Nonviolent/Crisis Intervention training, LINKS Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Master’s in Special Education</td>
<td>HQ in Social Studies, History, &amp; ELA LD Endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Master’s in Special Education Administration with Principal Certificate</td>
<td>HQ in Math K-8 EI Endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Masters in Ed leadership - K12 Principalship (currently working on Master’s In Special Education Administration)</td>
<td>Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) Instructor EI Endorsement LINKS Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Master’s in Special Education</td>
<td>LINKS Coordinator Early Childhood Endorsement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data show participants have a mean of approximately 12 years in aggregate of experience in inclusive practices. The number of years for each participant in inclusive practices ranges from 5 (P4) to 22 years (P1). Sixty percent of participants have over 10 years’ experience in teaching. Forty percent of participants have experience in inclusive practices. Eighty percent of participants have been in their current position for less than 10 years. One hundred percent of participants have been in the current position for more than 5 years. All participants ($N = 5$) have at least three years of implementing inclusive practices. P1 has 27 years of teaching experience and 22 years in inclusive practices. P2 has 14 years of teaching experience, all of which have been in inclusive practices. P3 has 9 years of teaching experience, all of which have been in inclusive practices. P4 has 7 years of teaching experience and 5 years in inclusive practices. P5 has 14 years of teaching experience and 9 years in inclusive practices. (See Table 13.)

**Table 13**

*Teachers’ Years of Teaching, in Current Position, and in Inclusion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Years in current position</th>
<th>Years in inclusive practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School Locations**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides geographic data to define areas in the U.S. territory. These areas are referred to as locales and are identified as *city, suburban, town,* and *rural* (Geverdt, 2015). Based on these definitions, locales are delineated on
the grounds of size of population when examining city and suburb school districts, but distance from urban centers when considering rural districts. Participants were recruited from suburb, town, and rural. The city area was not represented in the current study.

According to locale descriptions adapted from NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program manual, 3/5 (60%) of schools were in a town setting. Two were in settings described as fringe, indicating their placement within an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area. The third school setting was described as distant, indicating its placement within an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. One fifth (20%) of schools was in a mid-size suburb indicating its placement outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000, and 1/5 (20%) of schools was in a rural setting, described as fringe, indicating its placement less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area and less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster. (See Table 5.)

**Findings**

**Observations**

**Structural Descriptions**

Interviews were conducted after participants submitted a visual recording of themselves engaged in inclusive practices with students.

**P1 Observation Summary—COVID-19 Impact.** P1 observations and interviews were conducted during the heart of the pandemic. The school had just entered a hybrid schedule. The first observation was submitted on Friday, December 4, 2020. The second observation was submitted on Tuesday, December 15, 2020. Both were submitted using GoReact. The first interview was conducted on Monday, December 7, 2020 and the second interview was
conducted on Wednesday, December 16, 2020. The classes observed were two cotaught Math Essentials classes. Ten out of 15 students were present. P1 worked for six periods in a school day with 50% of the students present.

P1 went through the agenda and students were told what would happen—split into two groups and a teacher with each group. During the warm-up portion of the lesson, students watched a CNN10 video clip. One way of checking in with students was by the prompt, “Give a thumbs up.” A way to manage students while on the computer required students to turn off their computer screens while completing independent work and turn them back on when completed. While students were viewing the video, P1 checked in on students using the Chat box in Google Classroom. (She shared later that, if necessary, she texted them to get out of bed or to have a private conversation.)

Once in their breakout rooms, academic support was provided. Students were required to check on their Smart Goals, Check In, and Reflections. As students were working on their individual tasks, their cameras were turned off. Upon completion of these requirements, students were dismissed from the virtual classroom. Soft music played in the background while students worked for 10 minutes before checking back in with the teacher. P1 recognized that one particular student struggled with beginning a task and directed him to “figure out an assignment that you can start and finish in the time left” and reminded him to turn on the timer.

P1 used terms of endearment such as, “Bun Bun,” “Lovy Do,” and “Honey Buddy, Super proud,” which seems not to offend the students. P1 used a tool in Google Hangout to look up assignments and share screens. A student showed very little productivity and was provided the Response to Intervention (RTI) link to help complete outstanding/remaining assignments. P1 mused that having the student come into the school might be best for her, as mentioned in the
interviews regarding the principal’s decision. Students were directed to turn on their screens as the class period came to an end. P1 checked in with each student, asking specifically if a certain student would like to “come back to school.” The observation ended with a quick conference with the coteacher to discuss next steps for students who were not in attendance.

During the second observation P1 taught in person with the class and spent time with each student checking and helping to navigate the calendar to locate missing work. Calm music played in the classroom and Christmas decorations could be seen about the room. P1 held quiet conversations with students as they completed the Daily Individual Plan sheet. Periodically she reminded students to take a break from the computer, to look away and rest.

**P2 Observation Summary—COVID-19 Impact.** P2’s school district was functioning in remote learning mode. P2 observations and interviews were conducted while teaching completely remotely. P2 implemented the Team/Shared coteaching model. The first observation was submitted Friday, December 4, 2020. The second observation was submitted on Friday, December 18, 2020. Both were submitted using Google Classroom. The first interview was conducted on Monday, December 7, 2020 and the second on Tuesday, December 22, 2020.

During the first observation, to keep virtual learning as much the same as face-to-face learning, students were expected to go through the same procedures and did much of what would take place if they were in the school building. Students were required to use Google Docs to write up their warm ups. This is done every day and then turned in at the end of the week. The learning goal was displayed. Students copied the learning goal. This was part of their warm up. P2 was observed as he took attendance during warm up and dealt with a query regarding a student in attendance but not in the class schedule. The teachers set up breakout rooms where students found their learning goals, which was also introduced by P2.
Students viewed a TedEd video—*How Did Hitler Rise to Power?* The video was played in segments and both teachers worked together using questioning to model how to think through each inquiry. Discussion took place as both teachers took it in turns to go through the vocabulary sheet, which was found in Google Docs, talking about the words, providing real-life examples, and connecting to what was going on in the world today. They talked around the words and used scaffolding to write in the positive and negative statements. Students posted their comments and questions in the Chat box. For closure, P2 encouraged students to write at least two sentences—*Should the U.S. be interested when dictators rise to power?* linking it to foreign policy.

During the second observation, 25 students were in attendance. Of the 25 students, half were receiving special education services. The class was a wrap-up session for students to catch up on work. The class was divided up between students who needed more help with the homework and students who felt they had a firm grasp on the concepts. Those who needed to review the homework went with P2, and those who felt confident with the concepts went with the coteacher where they completed an enrichment activity relating to completed assignments.

Participant 2 then played Kahoot with those kids who had completed their work to review the different types of government. Students are directed to write it down into their warm-up document. While students were writing down their learning goal and watching a warm-up video, P2 put some things to think about in the Chat box regarding the News Stories—questions regarding the government’s role in contact tracing.

**P3 Observation Summary—COVID-19 Impact.** P3’s district voted to go back to school three days a week and functioned in hybrid mode beginning Monday, January 25, 2021 (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday). The first observation was submitted Tuesday, January 26, 2021. The second observation was submitted on Monday, February 8, 2021. Both observations were
submitted using Google Classroom. The first interview was conducted on Monday, February 1, 2021, and the second interview was conducted on Wednesday, February 10, 2021. During both observations, the teacher wore a mask throughout instruction. The room was very quiet and sparsely decorated, although there was a small poster reminding students to wash hands. Another stated, “This room is clean.” The door to the classroom remained open and during the time of the observation, two students walked by without entering.

Observations were conducted during 1st hour and covered the warm-up portion of the class. This lasted 15 minutes. There were two students in person who were given the opportunity to view the class again on Google Classroom. Also virtually present were two students who were watching through Google Classroom. Two students were absent but would be able to watch at a later time. (After the warm-up lesson, the class went on to play Jeopardy in preparation for an upcoming test. As a motivator, the winner received a point of extra credit to use on their test.)

P3 used questioning and scaffolding as the students worked through solving the problems displayed on the white board. Several words and phrases of affirmation and encouragement were used—“All set? Well done!,” “Don’t worry about all this …” (pointing to surrounding numbers), “Tell me how to find …,” “Take a risk … what do you think this is?,” “You get nervous? Talk yourself through it.” Several reminders were given to help students stay focused: “Put a line through it to let me know what I need to do,” “Any time you divide by …” He modeled how to identify answers by boxing around them. P3 used the example of finding the maximum heart rate to encourage students to find the solution to an algebraic equation. Students were told the equation would be placed in their study guide.

During the second interview students were reviewing steps to specific algebraic problems. On the white board, the participant used color-coded script to highlight the steps and
questioning took place at each stage of finding the solution. The participant addressed prior knowledge by referring to facts and skills previously covered and related them to what was currently being practiced. He addressed vocabulary phrases such as *like terms*. Rules were revisited: *move the number without a variable* and *rewrite after every step*. During both observations P3 provided several minutes after explaining steps to allow students to work independently and checked on students individually before moving on. While at the front of the class, he frequently changed his position.

**P4 Observation Summary—COVID-19 Impact.** P4’s district functioned in hybrid mode. The class size is normally six to eight students; however, COVID-19 restrictions have required classes to be reduced and split in half based on the alphabet creating a Monday/Tuesday group and a Thursday /Friday group. At the time of the observation, there were four in attendance. P4 wore a mask throughout the observation and on his desk were tissues and hand sanitizer along with a pile of files. The first observation was submitted on Monday, February 1, 2021. The second observation was submitted on Wednesday, February 3, 2021. The first interview was conducted on Tuesday, February 2, 2021. The second interview was conducted on Tuesday, February 9, 2021. YouTube was used for both submissions.

Both observations were conducted while the teacher taught in person, in the classroom, with instruction lasting about 20 minutes. During each observation a paraprofessional was present taking attendance and entering data from the students’ behavior time sheets. This is a way to give ownership of behavior to students and they are used for student accountability and self-assessment. Five behaviors are picked, and they become the focus of behavior intervention.

This group of students also shared the same Geometry class. The four students were all engaged in in the paper copies that were provided by their general education teacher. However,
their notes were also made available on Google Classroom. There was an additional student who was using the room as an academic support classroom.

Visible was the teacher’s desk, a globe, and several samples of student work, which were displayed on the walls. One of the classroom walls featured pictures of President George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The classroom had ample amounts of natural lighting.

At the beginning of the class, P4 informed students of what was to take place and gave out pencils. Using the white board at the front of the class, P4 engaged in drawing visuals in the way of shapes and identifying properties of each shape. This lesson was in preparation to complete a worksheet based on Unit 3. P4 referred to previous spelling and vocabulary, using descriptors for review. Questioning, underlining keywords, thinking aloud and notifying students of remaining time left were used to keep students engaged. P4 was observed walking around the class, checking in with individual students throughout the observation.

The second observation was conducted during an Aggression Replacement Training class. At the beginning of the class, students completed a warm up projected on the white board, asking student to think about the business they would set up if they had the opportunity. P4 used questioning to encourage students to join in a discussion based on a student’s suggestion. Students were encouraged to go to Google Classroom to locate their assignment and were required to choose from a selection of emotions depicted in the movie Inside Out—sadness, fear, happiness, disgust, and anger. Students were encouraged to discuss and were called upon to share ideas and examples. P4 brought in the current situation of COVID-19 when the class brainstormed about the meaning of fear. At one point, P4 redirected a student on appropriate response, Let’s try again. During the observation, P4 shared that his children watched the same movies for a month as students talked about movies they enjoyed watching. Students were told
that their homework was to complete a pie chart graphic organizer by connecting an emotion
with a chosen color. They were also cautioned not to compare their work with others since the
homework was about individual choice, which may not be the same as their peer. Students were
given a due date for completion of homework.

**P5 Observation Summary—COVID-19 Impact.** Students were in the classroom
receiving in-person instruction. The school district was functioning in hybrid mode.

The first observation was submitted Friday, February 12, 2021. The second observation
was submitted on Thursday, February 25, 2021. GoReact was used for both submissions. The
first interview was conducted Friday, February 19, 2021, and the second on Friday, March 5,
2021. P5 works with the general education students and general education teachers to facilitate
inclusion. The first observation took place during 6th hour, in a 9th grade Physical Science class.

Students were completing the Thermal Energy Lab Report (Study Guide). The class
lasted 44 minutes. In the general education classroom, the relationship between teachers was
very relaxed, with information to the class given with ease. There was a certain flow to the
transference of responsibilities. This was their 2nd year working together. There were 25
students in the room. Four were identified as LD, one as CI, who was also an English language
learner. This student was also considered a non-reader since he struggled with English. In the
front of the room was the full classroom and the lab was in the back. P5 sat in the back at the lab
table.

While the general education coteacher reviewed the goal of the lesson, which was to
complete the main idea, background information and outline based on the previous day’s work,
P5 walked through her group checking for correct handouts and student understanding. She
quietly restated the agenda to a student. Once the general education teacher completed the
introduction of the class, P5 addressed the entire class informing them of the opportunity to work with her in a different classroom. Moving to the back of the classroom, she quickly conferred with the general education teacher notifying her of what she would be reviewing and teaching, to which the general education teacher agreed.

In the resource room, the walls of the resource room were covered with student work.

At her desk, P5 went into Google Classroom, explained that the class would be using Google Sheets, and called out the steps to locating the graphic organizer. She then asked students to confirm the title of the document and verified that everyone was in the right place. As she modeled how to enter information, an example of the graphic organizer was created and placed so that it projected on to the whiteboard. Two students were working together as part of the Peer-to-Peer mentorship program. The mentor student participated with the class to provide modeling and note taking. The mentee was required to copy the notes. The student was reminded to do this several times. The LINKS student also translated for the student who receives English language services.

P5 questioned students throughout the process and modeled how to look through previous notes. At one point she froze the document camera so that another student could review the graphic organizer more closely. P5 circulated the classroom. Occasionally, she was observed redirecting a student, “Not right now.” “Beautiful,” she chuckles with another student as he finishes his drawing. P5 was observed chunking the tasks, reviewing with students two or three steps at a time. When students were questioned, P5 wrote down their responses and elaborated on them, while using thinking out loud, where necessary to provide thorough answers. “No, I like that” was heard from her as she wrote on the graphic organizer, in response to a student’s suggestion. She checked in with students as they wrote: “Can you understand my handwriting?”
and made the screen bigger to enlarge the print. Another strategy used was highlighting: “I’m going to highlight these as I go through.” Toward the end of the observation, P5 called the general education teacher to relay what was covered and confirmed the time to return to the class. As the class finished, P5 received a call addressing adult living as it appears in the IEP. At this point the camera was turned off. P5’s observations were conducted two months after the first participant, during the period where many districts were moving into the final phase of Stage 4.

**Structural Description Summary of Observations and Comparative Analysis of Observations**

All teachers had a working knowledge of Google Classroom, which features Google Hangout, Google Chat rooms, Google Classrooms, Google Breakout rooms, Google Sheets, and Google Voice (which was specifically referred to by P5).

**Disposition of Participants**

P1 showed enthusiasm and was enthusiastic; P2 was big on routine and team teaching; P3 was big on structure and routine and instructional routines/practices; P4 was balancing a young family while pursuing a graduate degree and working fulltime; P3 and P4 (40%) were similar in their facilitating of inclusion but contrasted in demeanor and classroom layout. P3 was logical and displayed little emotion while being observed. His classroom seemed to be sparsely furnished with little student work displayed. P4 displayed student work on walls and exuded energy and spontaneity in front of the class. P5’s emphasis is working with all students. P5 communicated passion and energy as she worked with her students. The walls of the resource room were covered with student work.

**Comparative Analysis**

P1, P2, P3, and P5 (80%) followed the same lesson structure during both observations. P4 conducted two different forms of lessons. P1 and P2 (40%) were observed going through the
agenda at the beginning of the lesson. P1, P2, P3, and P4 (80%) used a Daily Individual Plan or check-in sheets to assist students with self-monitoring. All participants (N = 5) assisted students as they worked with graphic organizers. P1, P4, and P5 (60%) were involved in the LINKS program. One participant was observed engaging with two students who worked together as part of the program. P4 and P5 (40%) both gave out pencils rather than escalate trivial student behavior that would otherwise interfere with student learning. The findings of the study were informed by the comparison of data to arrive at six major themes presented in Table 8.

**Composite Descriptions of Interviews**

*Roles and Responsibilities & Duties* were identified as major themes in depicting the essence of a high school special education inclusion teacher. A delineation between the two terms was justified as data revealed that some tasks were viewed as vehicles by which responsibilities could be most efficiently met but not necessarily required, and others were considered obligatory to being a special education teacher. *Interactions, Inclusive Practices, Unique Qualities*, and *COVID-19 Crisis* were also identified as major themes. The following is a composite description of the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher’s life in the inclusive setting based on data derived for the research question.

**Research Question 1: Roles as Viewed as One’s Position on a Team of Educators**

The first research question asked, How do special educators use their time to respond to the demands of their job? The answer to this question was uncovered as participants referred to their roles within in the bigger picture of the classroom environment and the accompanying activities. Data revealed the emergence of the following two themes related to the major theme of Roles: (a) teaching students as a special education teacher, and (b) breadth of knowledge to
understand the needs of students. How participants spent their time was influenced by the role they assumed while providing academic instruction and additional supports in the classroom.

**Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher**

**Providing Academic Support**

As participants talked about their role in providing inclusion, providing academic support emerged as an area in which their time was spent while teaching students. Participants summarized the essence of their role. P2 said,

As a special education teacher I always try to get to know my students. I’ll look up all their accommodations and make a list and keep it in the room of all their accommodations and then of course really tried to always extend those accommodations when appropriate.

P3 advised, “Just building those relationships. Knowing that they’re going to have a reliable teacher that’s gonna care for them, check their grades, hold them accountable—that kind of stuff, they like that structure.” P4 viewed his role as “more of a consultant to those coteachers.” P5 said, “Knowing what kind of groups to pull and knowing how to differentiate. I know what’s gonna get the job done.” Two out of five participants expressed a desire to “open it up to students, if they need it.” P1 was excited to share:

… students who don’t have an IEP or a 504 as well. They’re coming … please can I come with you? Absolutely! C’mon! In fact, you know, when we go in and coteach, I shout it from the mountaintops—I am a special education teacher … I will shout it from the mountaintops every time when we have to split in a general education class—if I need to pull my kids out to do some remediation.

P2 said, “I also don't limit it to the students who qualify with special education,” referring to his desire to get to know all students in the class.

To uncover what participants believed to be effective, participants were asked what they wished to do more of. P1 stated:
Early intervention. Early RTI. You know, getting those kids earlier and being able to intervene faster so they can keep up with the classrooms. Because right now the content moves on. If we pull a kid, the teachers go on and I don’t want them to miss instruction. So I wish we had more time in our day where instruction stopped and ceased and we had time to just intervene.

P2 shared, “I wish I had more time for each individual student on my case load. I really enjoyed meeting with them one on one. I wish I could really have more time to connect with them.”

Similarly, P4 shared his concerns regarding time spent with students. He described the difficulty he has in allocating time to spend with his caseload students when they are in the general education classroom. “I’m trying to get them [EI students] out and included in the gen ed.” But he also has “classes full of CI students who, of course, need a place to go … mostly because we don't have options.”

P5 shared:

So wish I had more time to do actual interventions with the kids that need it … in the resource room I might have a math class going on but then I also have several students doing an online class, doing their academic supports. So I get my math kids started and then I’ll check someone’s grade and then I’ll check their on line class progress. So I might have five kids in here in there all day and different things … I wish that I had more dedicated instructional time like, direct instruction in those areas for like my students, like my non-readers. They are getting it, but I want more.

**Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students**

**Advocacy**

Participants’ use of time was influenced by their ability to know their students. This knowledge was demonstrated as participants talked about ways in which they were able to advocate on behalf their students. P3 shared his role in providing advocacy while describing a situation where a student lacked confidence, “The student was kind of shy and she said she asked him [the teacher], and he wasn’t hearing her … I’m trying to get the kids to *advocate for themselves* first at this level and then I’ll step in.” P4 addressed the importance of working with...
teachers to create a space for all children to demonstrate their learning: “But you know that was big steps that we undertake as far as being flexible, letting kids kind of show that they learn in different ways—you know, those UDL principles that we talk about.”

**Providing Appropriate Learning Environments**

All participants commented on a shift in preparing students for employment rather than college and suggestions were made to make more accessible extracurricular activities and provide a broader scope of postsecondary possibilities. Perhaps the crux of all other statements could be summed up in the comment provided by P4, who said, “You have to go to college to be successful is not a true statement.” Needless to say, the need for postsecondary plans is an important consideration at the high school level. Combining advocacy with transition, P4 underscored the importance of his role of knowing students as it pertains to agency and self-advocacy in postsecondary life:

The ultimate goal, we base all of our ideas and things off transition. I think that’s got to be the focus. So, how can I get these kids employable and to a realistic expectation of what employment looks like for them, you know … we have a Career Center that we use. It’s a Vocational Ed school that they can go to for half the day when they’re juniors and seniors. So we try to push some of the trades into it but it’s really up to them because you know I tried to get them like I said to a point of employability for some of my kids.

Other participants demonstrated the ability to know their students as they talked about creating appropriate learning environments conducive to transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary education and independent life. As stated by P3,

I tried to push that (diploma track) as much as possible because on their applications they would have the mark but they’re not they don’t have a high school diploma and they won’t get hired so … In the long run, being successful citizens that can manage their money and be employable.

P5 had a similar message about independency:

So this particular group, academically, they are freshman and so my goal for them is to be able to gain more independence in like comprehending, reading, like academic readings.
Because I find that so much of my time is just showing them this is where the information is, this is how you put it in your own words. So my ultimate goal for all of them is independence in ... all areas ... and they start to do it independently. So like my hope is—I’m doing, I’m having my freshmen and my sophomores, you know, holding their hand and doing the test with them, but by the time they are seniors, they can get something back and revise it on their own and know what errors to look for.

Two of the five teachers noted the potential for positive outcomes when class schedules are designed to maximize benefits for students based on their specific disability. P4 strategically plans his day, knowing what his students will need to get them through the day, using the Aggression Replacement Therapy (ART) curriculum designed to provide behavioral, cognitive, and emotional intervention for aggressive youth (Ayasse, 2012). “First hour is when I always have that class and it kind of just sets the tone for the rest of the day for I think a lot of the kids that need it.” He continued by outlining his strategy to influence student outcomes for the future:

Some of the things that I’ve pushed have been the personal curriculum and using those way more … our students to go to the Tech Center so they don’t have to take you know Algebra or Chemistry 2 and Physics 2, and American Literature, you know, there are so many requirements that our district has specifically, and our kids are not college bound kids … I wish we could tailor programming without a personal curriculum, but we just can’t.

P4 was the only one to address the tracking system often evident among special education schedules, “And some of my kids are in there, not all of them—we’re trying not to push into the same classes all together, otherwise they kind of spend the whole day together and we don’t want that.” In much the same way, P2 highlighted the need for the transition plan to dictate scheduling:

It goes back to the transition plan. If they say they want to be a doctor, then they take Algebra 2. If they say they want to work in a gas station, we can waive that. We can waive foreign language requirements and that’s helped.
Quite aptly, P5 expressed her feelings toward the task of scheduling and described the process as “putting together a puzzle” with special educators as “the flexible ones” to “just make it work and go ahead.”

To uncover what participants believed to be effective, participants were asked what they wished to do more of. Since participants were aware of the needs of their students, they focused on providing supports that would increase positive student outcome. P1 talked about activities leading to employment:

I’m hoping that we bring back, you know Trades programs back into the public schools. That we bring Wood Shop back, that we bring Food and Nutrition back. And we bring worksite-based learning back and that we don’t hide behind this facade that every student that graduates high school is going on to a four-year university.

She added, “We would love to get our kids working as seniors right now—school half a day and go to your work site-based learning experience, internships … all of that stuff! I would love to see that come back around.”

P2 discussed the rigidity of the general education curriculum:

I feel that sometimes we do students a disservice by only having two tracks in high school. You’re either on the diploma track or you’re on the certificate of completion track. I feel that our diploma track is not easily modified enough for the students who are not going to college … I think it’s kind of like forcing them to take 4 levels of math, 4 levels of science … but I wish there was I wish it was more easily modified.

P3 reflected on how he could continue providing an appropriate environment after the school bell rings, “I wish I could take them all home because I feel like if they had some more structure at home. It would help them.”

*Providing Socioemotional Support*

The role of participants was evident in their ability to provide socioemotional support. Participants shared how knowing their students allowed them to understand and work through the nuances of teenagers’ behaviors and attitudes. P1 said, “I’ve always like just tried to be on
the level with students—just be honest with them and you know just be human with them and you know talk to them like an adult really.” P2 shared how a portion of his time is spent: “I spend my plan period and take him for a little walk around … and just connect with them.” P4 demonstrated the importance of knowing how his students perceive his presence in the classroom:

A lot of them are self-conscious about me even being in the room, you know. So I try to give them the space. As high school kids they care about social awareness and things like that so their status is important and so I try to support but for most of my kids they don’t need me there every day. It’s just those times when they do need me that I need to be there.

He further explained what socioemotional support meant in his situation: “When I first started, I had to realize that you know, you’re a parent kind of to these kids in so many ways.”

In addition to understanding and working through the nuances of teenagers’ behaviors and attitudes, having an understanding of students allowed her to look beyond the classroom to the extended ecological systems in a child’s life.

We are dealing with social emotional piece. We’re dealing with homelessness. We’re dealing with critical conditions. We’re dealing with you know, all of that, you know, stuff that’s under the surface, that the general education teachers generally don’t take care of.

**Research Question 1 Responsibilities and Duties as a High School Special Education Inclusion Teacher**

The answer to the first research question continued to be revealed as participants referred to *responsibilities and duties* obligatory to being a special education teacher. This term was identified as the second major theme. Similar to Roles, the data revealed the emergence of the following two themes related to the major theme of Responsibilities & Duties: (a) providing academic support, and (b) providing teacher support. What follows is a description of how time is spent while high school special education inclusion teachers carry out tasks. These tasks are
believed to be essential components to responsibilities and duties of the special education inclusion teacher at the high school level.

**Providing Academic Support**

**MTSS and RTI**

The emerging theme Providing Academic Support was demonstrated in participants’ involvement in MTSS and RTI, indicative of the ubiquitous nature of their responsibilities which places them at every level of instruction, small group instruction, and coteaching. Regarding MTSS and RTI, teachers’ comments demonstrated their commitment to achieving positive outcomes for all students as they acknowledge the integral position they hold within their school’s design. While some participants addressed involvement as a role in their conversation, each one shared that their involvement was mandatory and a part of their responsibilities. It is worth noting that the terms MTSS and RTI were interchangeable in meaning based on participants’ responses.

As a means to providing support, P2 viewed MTSS/RTI as “something that I just take on as my responsibility and it just kind of flows.” P3 explained his arrangement, indicating changes due to the pandemic:

I think my academic support class is definitely the Tier 2 … In this building RTI is considered a Tier 3 intervention which is provided during the late afternoon evenings on Tuesday and Thursday—4 p.m. to 8 p.m. Pre-COVID it took place from 2:30 to 3 p.m.

While there seemed to be little animosity about the responsibility of providing academic support in this way, P4 expressed concern about the fidelity in which the tiers are implemented.

I’m on the intervention committee—we’ve talked about the lack of RTI academically. I think RTI at the high school isn’t quite as developed as maybe in our elementary schools where we have different levels because there are no—is it, you know, it’s Tier 1 and it’s Special Ed.
P5 shared an alternative perspective: “I feel like my role in RTI is important and in an inclusive setting especially because helping all students, I feel like I’m helping my students.” She went on to explain:

Because it’s lightening the load that might be on the gen ed teacher … My focus is never just on the students with IEPs. I find myself all the time pulling groups that have been students that are somewhere in those tiers, you know, of struggling.

**Small Groups**

As part of their responsibility, participants work in small groups to provide academic support. P1 explained how a program to provide social interaction for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) works in her classrooms.

So you know, we pair them up so they are a diverse group even in their own book club. So then if you have a really high flying, outgoing, extroverted student and then you know that are leading everything, our kids, they tend to pull our kids along and so their comfort level increases, and their confidence increases, and their self-esteem increases because there’s no judging.

She is referring to the LINKS peer to peer program in which P4 and P5 also participate. P4 interacts with the general education student body to match a general student to a student with an IEP and they serve as a mentor and they have a class together … A lot of times it’s the athletes that I know that I’ll grab and I’ll say, Hey, come to this meeting—come check out LINKS with me. And they’ll come and they’ll love it … it's just another way that I’m trying to support inclusion.

**Coteaching**

As special education teachers engage in tiered instruction, coteaching methods are used to provide support. All participants shared their experience of coteaching.

“So we’re coteaching math class where, right now, he’s got the math kids and I have the academic support kids and then we’ll flip eventually,” said P1.

P2 explained his philosophical approach to team teaching, another term for shared teaching:
My philosophy is that I’ve really always just trying to be the 50%, really how it works out is both of us, my teammates and I, both of us really lend support to the students who need it, and they don’t know who’s who and who’s what. They just think there’s two teachers in there.

P3 remarked, “I’ve cotaught in the past, so a lot of these teachers know me. So that helps,” referring to the exposure coteaching brings. He further explained,

There’s a seminar time, which we’re not doing this year, but we’ve done it in the past. I go in with gen ed teacher and gen ed students and then I also have students with IEPS in there and we coteach. It’s like a study hall—Tuesdays and Thursdays.

P4 explained, “I do coteach in that mentality—that I’m pre-teaching just not in the room at the same time with those teachers.” P4 pre-teaches so that when students attend the general education classroom they are “totally ready.” While engaged in complementary teaching, P5 stated, “… I kind of I think to myself, what is she saying that could be confusing to these kids? How can I clarify? So, I do a lot of that.” She went on to provide her definition of parallel teaching:

Also parallel teaching—where she [the general education teacher] has a group in the classroom that’s working on an assignment, I’ll pull a group working on the same assignment with just a little more support and differentiated a little differently.

**Providing Teacher Support**

**Data Collection**

The emerging theme Providing Teacher Support became apparent as participants shared how they work with general education teachers to make inclusion possible. Data collection is vital for progress monitoring to make informed decisions about instruction and intervention. Not surprisingly, participants referred to data collection as a task undertaken to provide teacher support. P1 shared how she verifies accountability:

I have a check sheet—’cause I wanna know exactly what the kids are working on every single day. So they have to tell us, you know what subject they’re going to be working on so I can keep track of that all week long and be like, OK Yep, they did that. Yep, they did
that. So now so just kind of like organization for me to get ready for that next half an hour.

P3 informed that he conducts data collection every day, “I would say daily—with all the informal assessments that I give with ticket outs and warm ups and stuff ... it’s usually at the end or the beginning of the hour.” P3 shared how he assesses student learning:

I’m going by that ticket out and warm up every day. It’s huge because they know what’s coming and it’s an informal assessment that I can get a gauge on do they really know it or not … COVID and pre COVID, I do both of ’em. All the time, every day almost. 80-90% of the time.

He went on to explain his rationale.

For instance, last week I did ticket outs and they weren’t getting it and they weren’t doing their homework and they, at some point you have to move on. Yeah, just wait for them to get it and they’re 22 years old they’re like, oh, I finally got it! At some point you have to use your discretion and say it’s time to move on—you guys have to stay after school or something. 70% of you guys are getting it 30% are not. What are you 30 doing to make sure you get it?

Said P4, “We use accountability sheets … I try to give the ownership to the kid a lot.” P4 shared a fact that is known by many educators, “You go back to the data. Is it actually helping or is it are they getting sent out every day?... My behavior data comes from those time sheets. So that's kind of my IEP assessment.”

P5 explained one way she shares progress monitoring with her coteacher: “I’ll say, well I pulled this group, this student got it done pretty easily. This group probably needs me and so and that’s how we usually identify like which kids will come with me.” P5 referred to one of her students as a “certificate track student.” This means that the student is assessed on exposure to content and participation. “He’ll only do the test once and if he fails it, we just kind of move forward. For him and for other certificate track students, we just keep moving on.”

Differentiating between assessment methods, she explained, “The other students if they fail they get an accommodation of a retake or we’ll eliminate answers.”
Research Question 2 Roles

The second research question asked, How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level? The answer to this question was uncovered as participants discussed their relationships with general education teachers while fulfilling their roles, responsibilities, and duties. Data revealed the emergence of the following themes related to the major theme of Roles: (a) teaching students as a special education teacher, (b) providing supports based on depth of knowledge of students, and (c) sharing knowledge. In addition, the data revealed the emergence of the following theme related to Responsibilities & Duties: (a) providing teacher support. Hence, interactions between the special and general education teachers took place as they taught, provided supports to both student and teacher, and shared their knowledge.

Teaching Students as Special Education Teacher

Providing Academic Support

The emerging theme Teaching Students as Special Education Teacher became apparent as P5 shared her interaction experience in her role as special education teacher. As she sought to provide academic support, she was met with opposition from the general education teacher. She shared,

They don’t always want—they either think I’m providing too much support, or they don’t want me to help and this is varies from teacher to teacher but one big thing I’ve come into is that they feel like I’m helping too much and they don’t want me pulling kids that are doing OK. So there’s a kid that has an A in the class. They don’t want me pulling that kid with my group because they don’t need help but getting them to understand like but they’re helping … so that’s my biggest struggle is them feeling like I’m doing too much or that I’m in some way giving the kids too much of a leg up.
Sharing Knowledge

Providing Teacher Support

The emerging theme Sharing Knowledge became apparent as four participants shared how they provided teacher support to minimize conflict and establish an atmosphere of open communication. P1 addressed her philosophy, alluding to her level of expertise: “They’re all gifted kids first. *I’m just here to help you help the kids*, you know?” In addition, she shared,

I think they [teachers] feel supported. I think they feel heard. If they have a concern, they bring it to us, and we listen. We problem solve. We don’t tell them what we expect them to do, we teach them how to let it naturally play out.

P2 shared his technique based on consideration and empathy, “Just be honest with teachers, follow through with what I say I’m gonna do … Trying to make things simple or them … don’t overwhelm … coming at it from a special education perspective.” He provided an example, “For instance, like sending them a lot of information through email. Just keep it quick—to the point right because they are not getting this for just one student; they’re getting it for maybe 20 students too.”

“I try and go on a non-emotional piece,” P3 commented, as he explained his approach when interacting with colleagues. P4 shared his procedure to create student success:

I’ll write a behavior plan and when they see those steps of *if the kid does this and I see the escalation*, I think they feel more comfortable … think I think teachers like having a behavior plan or they like having an *out* in a lot of ways.

Data revealed an aspect of interaction requiring the special educator to exercise expertise in the law since fidelity in implementing the IEP appeared to be a significant concern. P5 shared, “We don’t agree on appropriate accommodations and modifications. Where the general teacher’s like—*well, nope, they should be able to do this*. So we can do, you know, you have to walk that fine line, you know.”
P3 shared his experience in encouraging the general education teachers to appreciate the relevance of the IEP:

When teachers get accommodations and modifications that we give to them every trimester and they don’t take the time to read them … it’s like accommodations are like glasses—if you don’t have them, you can’t see. so you might think they’re being bad or not want to take their [test] … for instance, I have this girl with tremors and she can’t write well because it’s all shaky so just getting the teachers to realize that she really can’t write well and if you make her do that it’s gonna take all her time instead of listening and you’re not going to be able to read it anyway so, it’s getting them to understand.

P2 made a similar comment:

I think just them understanding that they [students] really need what they’re getting, and they are not being—and some are some are being lazy—but they (teachers) have this view of, why do I need to print their notes off?

**Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students**

*Advocacy*

The emerging theme Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students became apparent as participants interacted with general education teachers advocating for student support. P3 and P4 were most similar in the way they provide for inclusion yet had different approaches to advocating on behalf of students. P3 talked about support for students, “It isn’t always a matter of the general education teacher deliberately ignoring requirements. Sometimes ‘they just forget.’” He added that at such times, he [tries] “to get the kids to advocate for themselves.” P4 talked about adhering to IDEA requirement:

So if a kid has a late assignment, they automatically get half credit and I sometimes have to go in there and say well you know I don’t want to pull the book out and say his IEP says *extended time on assignments*. So I have to do that in a way that they understand why that’s the case …
Research Question 2 Responsibilities and Duties

Providing Teacher Support

Collaboration, Communication, and Parity

The emerging theme Providing Teacher Support became apparent as a means to describe interaction with general education teachers. Prominent was the need to practice collaboration and parity. Expectedly, communication and collaboration took place as teachers interacted with one another. Participants communicated their commitment to shared values and goals by their willingness to collaborate.

P1 sought to be open in her communication and stated that she is not trying to take over the gen ed teacher’s role, like you are the expert in your content area I am the expert in my content area—we just need to work together. So we opened up the lines of communication. We opened all the doors. There’s no secrets … these kids that are going to be sitting in your classroom. The general education teacher deserves to know every single thing about that student.

She explained her way of building relationships to achieve collaboration. “You have to encourage them and say you’re so good at this … it will be fine and … these kids will love you. It will be fine. You have to give the gen ed teachers tools as well.”

P2 shared his process:

I’ve been working with my teammates for a few years now. When we first met I think a very important conversation that we had when we first met was discussing our philosophies and discussing, you know, the philosophy of having students in the inclusive setting and then of course what we would, how we would react to certain situations and then of course setting up those classroom management, that piece, and getting on the same page as far as all that stuff goes. And then, as well to kind of take it further, a lot of reflection together—like if we had a tough day or tough incident that happened, we talk about it. We talk about how we handled it and be honest with each other.

P3 advised, “Build that relationship with the teachers too [to communicate] that we’re on the same team and we need to build that community.”
When asked about difficult situations associated with working with general education teachers to provide support, P1 touched on the importance of timely feedback,

The teacher didn’t update the grade book and that’s what we rely on … I said, I’m not your boss, who am I to tell her to get her grades done, but you have to realize that these kids are sitting, we check every week, so let us know if they’re failing. Let us know, we’ll take care of it, even if you don’t have it in the grade book …

Similarly, P2 talked about the occasional disagreement, “99.9% of the time we get along really well … sometimes there can be discipline situations or management situations where maybe I think some things are not handled appropriately or too hard or maybe too soft.”

P4 admitted that collaboration is difficult when working with a wide age range of teachers, “I have to be so tactful and then when and how I approach a teacher.” P5 pointed to poor collaboration as a restriction to teachers fulfilling their responsibility to support teachers and provide effective instruction. P5 shared that effective joint planning is contingent on “the high school teacher’s willingness to collaborate … and they are not always as collaborative.” She further explains her viewpoint: “[It is] difficult to know if they [gen ed teachers] are actually planning ahead and how much are they looking into what the students are struggling with and what they need.”

Sharing Information

Likewise, while interacting with the general education teacher to provide inclusion, some participants discussed how they shared information. P3 shared,

So every year, at the beginning of the year I put out an IEP at a Glance which is kind of like a summary of what the kids like, what accommodations they have, and then I just walk and talk to teachers—how is so and so doing?

P4 shared how he interacts to communicate support and build confidence:

… and it’s a simple as making a point to peek my head in once a week because they talked about Billy … or whatever and I know Billy keeps falling asleep so they see me
pop in my head. I think that’s enough just to show them that I’m on their side, I’m there to support them.

P5 shared,

I go in with information about the students. So I think that when I begin that working relationship, for me to go in and say these are the students we have. This is what they struggle in, well that helps.

P5 went on to sum up her interpretation on the inter-relational bond between general and special education teacher stating, “The special ed is not separate from the gen ed.”

Research stresses the importance of a shared plan time (Bear & Proctor, 1990; Klinger et al., 1998; Scruggs et al., 2007). While this was not the case for all teachers in the research, teachers talked about ways they were able to share student information for monitoring and planning purposes. Currently, P1 takes the time during warm up to connect with the teacher and plan student break out rooms for the lesson. To explain her data dissemination, P1 informed, “So we have to meet before school, after school, at lunchtime. Squeeze it in. Find a time to see if it works—it might be a quick phone call but we have to build it into our school day.”

P4 shared how interactions take place at both the teacher-to-teacher level to verify data, and the teacher-to-student level to hold accountable appropriate behavior. He shared,

I’ll talk to them [teachers] and because a lot of the time a kid will say I had a great day and then I’ll go and I’ll hear from someone that they didn’t, you know, he had a couple of things that he struggled with in an hour, so I’ll go back and have that conversation with kid again.

P5 shared, “I’ll say, well I pulled this group. This student got it done pretty easily. This group probably needs me and that’s how we usually identify which kids will come with me.” She continued,

It’s usually at the end or the beginning of the hour … we’ll kind of debrief with each other and talk about whether we need to review things. Or she’ll often send me an email and say, Hey, do you think I need to provide more examples? Do you think we need to practice this a little more? She kind of will bounce ideas off of me.
Some participants shared what they believed to be requisites of successful relations. P2 talked about the level of honesty required to keep communication authentic and effective:

You know, my teammates and I have had some tough conversations where I’ve heard from my teammates, “Hey, I really wish you would have handled that this way, you know that kind of made me feel like this.” So I think that’s important to establish that up front—is having those honest conversations and then doing that.

P4 and P5 talked about the role of being flexible. “That’s probably the biggest thing, is trying to battle those black and white thoughts that [teachers] have: and it’s this way and it’s this way and not offering the flexibility [to accommodate the diversity in learning],” said P4. P5 stated, “And so I find myself being very flexible, so it’s my job to be the flexible one.”

**Research Question 3 Roles**

The third research question asked, What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in districts across Southwest Michigan? The answer to this question was uncovered as participants discussed the learning environment and the use of strategies to facilitate inclusive learning while fulfilling their role, responsibilities, and duties. Data revealed the emergence of the following themes related to the major theme of Roles: (a) teaching students as a special education teacher, and (b) breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students. Hence, inclusive practices were revealed as participants fulfilled their teaching role as a special education using their breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students.

**Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher**

*Providing Academic Support*

The emerging theme Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher became apparent as participants talked about ways they provided academic support to facilitate inclusion. Various activities and practices were identified.
Task Analysis. P1 noted task analysis: “When we bring the assignments down into smaller more manageable parts.” Similarly, P2 connected to the principles of UDL:

We just look at and try to be a little bit more creative and say, OK, if we’re going to do this, what are some, how can we make this available to everybody? How can we make options in this and that.

P2 used the term *instructional strategies* describing them as “things that you can use to for reading or writing, you know graphic organizers, and like you mentioned, the multiple modes, the *universal design for learning.*” He talked about the use of visuals. He said, “help me a lot and I think they help me explain things.” He further explained,

I can say, *all right let’s look at this for example.* Like, you know, if they have something to look at, and then hear me explain it, and see it in context. I think the visuals are amazing. Even if we just get online to some random topic or something, I’ll try to bring up like a Google image of something to show the kids or talk about or discuss—give them something to look at it.

P4 reiterated the need for UDL: “So the biggest thing for me is trying to develop UDL, trying to get teachers to understand that this student can do the same assignment in a different way, maybe and still get the idea …”

Incorporating practices to promote learning from peers, some participants believe in the impact of modeling to provide “age-appropriate behavior training and study habits and things like that—So not just school behaviors but just overall age-appropriate interaction,” noted P4. This includes opportunities for “work skills. Being able to interact with people that are not disabled …” was noted by P5. She also acknowledged her role. She takes an empathetic approach to modeling and will

take the role of the student and get a lot of clarification out of the teacher … modeling and so even study skills. Like if I sit with them and I show that—*I want you to highlight this,* or even organizing their materials. *Let’s do this* show that modeling, showing them how to do things
to help establish generalization and “scaffold instruction.” She described how she operates: “I kind of interject in class and I stand up, and I talk to class, and I start to engage with the content questions to clarify things. I find that really helps.” P5 also acknowledged the role played by general education teachers to provide “instruction from a highly qualified teacher.”

Regarding routine and structure, P2 shared his thoughts: “I think if you incorporate like a good reading strategy and then go you know stick with it, really incorporate it and just try and use that like once a week.” Similarly, P3 referred to systems and procedures: “I think structure, I think expectations—you know, this is how we do things in here, but just being consistent with everything you doing and don’t treat anybody else differently because they’ll pick up right.” He explained a little further, “I just think having my pattern—every day there’s going to be a warm up. Every day there’s gonna be a lesson either, a new one or based on yesterday’s ticket out. If they all struggle, I’ll reteach that.”

P3 shared the student engagement strategies he uses every day to gauge learning: “I’m going by that Ticket out and warm up every day. It’s huge because they know what’s coming and it’s an informal assessment that I can get a gauge on do they really know it or not.” In addition, he also uses “hands-on groupwork. They’re kind of in charge because if I’m just talking at them all the time they’re bored and they’re not engaged at all. So finding ways to engage my students.”

“Pulling Mixed Groups” was a strategy noted by P1 and P5. P2 said, … the inclusive part takes place when students are invited to join. I’ll often say like, if you would like to hear it, come with me but if you’re fine you know stay here. So I just open it up to students, if they need it.

This was a comment similar to P1.
P1, P4, and P5 all participate in a peer-to-peer social development program. P2 and P3 do not; however, P2 referred to the social aspect of inclusion:

I really think they benefit from the social and emotional part. They learn from their peers. I mean I just think that they really benefit from that least restrictive environment socially and of course they’re learning. They’re learning communication skills, they’re learning the social skills, they’re learning about each other. All those kinds of soft skills or intangibles.

P3 was of a similar mind as he focused his discussion on empathy:

I think the kids who help those kids out gain even more than the kids who are getting helped because they don’t realize until they see it how much they struggle and what they need and how fortunate they are to be in their position. Students who don’t receive services have the opportunity to develop empathy. To see what it was like which, is part of developing the soft skills which you know nobody (sic) you don’t teach that … when they go to school—you’re learning all these things that you have no idea- it was not the intention to learn.

**Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students**

*Providing Appropriate Learning Environments*

The emerging theme Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students became apparent as participants developed ways to provide appropriate learning environments for inclusion to take place. Participants demonstrated an understanding of inclusion as they referred to the necessary conditions best conducive to student learning the general education curriculum and focused on practices to promote an appropriate learning environment. P1 talked about a “sense of belonging” as she explained,

… they are our kids. There is no separation anymore and that can be seen in all levels … we established the LINKS program … to see this in action in general ed classes, even the teachers can’t believe that this is happening.

P2 touched on *respect* and advised,

You really have to have students who are respectful of others’ differences—which district’s students are. They excel tremendously at this. They are almost always very respectful of differences and other students. For instance, I can I think of a student with
autism who struggles with blurt out. He’s brilliant but will blurt out things and they [students] understand, they know that he can’t help himself.

Teachers talked about the interpretation and implementation of least restrictive environment in their building. P3 said,

Facilitating LRE—It’s an individual case obviously. Some students are gonna need more help than others but everybody’s in the general classroom whether they get a personal curriculum or not. I think we do a really good job at least restrictive environment—of not having, you know, the back hallway filled with kids with special needs all day long.

P4 shared how he struggled to identify what was needed in his building, admitting, “There’s gotta be like a mindset shift, you know, within our school, our district, I don’t know what it is.”

Providing a philosophical perspective to phrase the issue of inclusion, P4 commented,

… how can we continue to raise that bar of least restrictive environment right so that their least restrictive continues to be closer to gen ed full time without support. We may never get there, but you know, if that’s the end goal, we’re gonna continue to shoot for that.

P5 talked about one of her caseload students “who struggles academically and behaviorally and needs direct supervision 100%.” She expressed her frustration at the scheduling decision to find a physical environment that brought the least disruption to staff at the expense of the least restrictive environment for the student.

… Sometimes I get pushback that they just need to be in the resource room and making it clear to them that this student needs to be in a gym class … instead of being put in a gym class where there could be behaviors no, put ‘em in a computer class where they’re just sitting there!

She also shared that what is needed is “a more trusting environment.”

**Research Question 4 Roles**

The fourth research question asked, As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting, what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their value added? The answer to this question was uncovered as participants discussed their role in understanding students and the responsibilities and duties that are associated with being a special
education inclusion teacher at the high school level. Data revealed the emergence of the following theme related to the major theme of Roles: (a) sharing knowledge. In addition, the data revealed the emergence of the following themes related to Responsibilities & Duties: (a) providing academic support, (b) providing teacher support, and (c) managing the IEP caseload. Hence, unique qualities were revealed as participants shared their experiences of facilitating inclusion as a high school special education teacher.

**Sharing Knowledge**

The emerging theme Sharing Knowledge became apparent as two participants discussed their role in providing teacher support. P2 also alluded to the notion of possessing specific knowledge:

I think as well, probably, I have a lot more I have a lot of background on students because I teach at different levels. So by the time they get up to be a junior and they take government, I’ve probably had them as a sophomore and maybe as a freshman. So I can, I know their backgrounds a little bit more and then I think special education teachers, we do a lot more home contacts too. We have a lot of, I know that we have a lot more communication with families and parents.

The response given by P4 reflected his unique situation. He noted that in his situation, his role “naturally makes a divide,” which means general education teachers are of the opinion that his caseload students “are your kids.” He also talked about sharing knowledge to “build that team work” and “good habits.” P4 focus is on “educating … [to] change like the way they behave. So, I can’t change their belief, but I can change the behavior …”
Research Question 4 Responsibilities & Duties

Providing Academic Support

Coteaching

The emerging theme Providing Academic Support became apparent as one participant talked about coteaching and shared that differentiating and coteacher were her biggest unique qualities. P5 said,

I definitely feel like I know different ways to differentiate. So like, I can be that second set of eyes to recognize when something’s not clicking or when it’s not going so smoothly for the students. So I would just say, my knowledge in coteaching. So you talked about the different models of coteaching with, understanding that there’s a lot of different ways that we can do this, brings a lot to the table.

Providing Teacher Support

Sharing Knowledge

The emerging theme Providing Teacher Support became apparent as several participants addressed their responsibility to provide information in their area of expertise. P1 described her responsibility by juxtaposing it with that of the general education teacher:

The general education teacher delivers the content. They deliver the content to the students in the subject area. It is my job to support and make content accessible to students who are on caseload or to students who are at risk or any student. So my job is to support the general education teacher with knowing accommodation and IEPs, you know, supports and services that are for every student that’s in their classroom. I am the one who modifies and accommodates … we provide professional development right within our building, showing teachers how to, because there is a difference between accommodations and modifications.

She further described her role as consultant to general education teachers.

Similar to P1, P4 had the responsibility of consultant to other special education teachers in addition to being a special education caseload teacher to students identified with emotional impairments.
Managing IEP Caseload

The emergent Managing IEP Caseload became apparent as one participant drew attention to the IEP to delineate the differences between the special and general educators’ tasks.

P3 said:

I think I think they are just different.“A lot of times the gen ed teacher will joke and say, Oh, I wish I had 10 kids in my class. They’re not serious ’cause they don’t. I say, go do my job. I’ll take your whatever … I think the IEPs are a big difference … just the paperwork that it takes. Doing the accommodations. Writing the IEP. Getting ahold of the parents holding a meeting … —just calling parents, saying, can you come this day or this day? and emails—it’s crazy.

Research Question 5 Roles

The fifth research question asked, What is the experience of high school special education inclusion teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?

Data revealed the emergence of the following themes related to the major theme of Roles: (a) teaching students as a special education teacher, (b) demonstrating breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students, and (c) sharing knowledge. In addition, data revealed the emergence of the following themes related to the major theme Responsibilities & Duties: (a) Providing Academic Support, and (b) Managing IEP Caseload. Hence, special education teachers’ experience of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was evident as they fulfilled their roles, responsibilities, and duties to teach students using their breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students. Further, they continued to share their knowledge to provide support and understanding and managed the IEP to remain compliant with IDEA regulations.
Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher

Providing Academic Support

The emerging theme Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher became apparent as participants talked about ways they provided academic support. During the early days of virtual teaching, schedules became even more focused on providing the general education curriculum to a diverse population of students.

P1, who was interviewed in the first trimester said,

All of the executive orders have always stated that any student with an IEP or 504 that needs access to live instruction can still come into the building. So, we have really taken advantage of that. So when we were on our hybrid model, our Wednesdays were our intervention day. So we brought 20 kids in every Wednesday that had an IEP or 504 to either get specially designed instruction, remediation, or just some basic help.

P2’s school remained completely virtual throughout the school year. The intent was to “keep as much the same as possible,” he said, referring to the unsettling effects of change on students.

[When in Google Classroom] one thing we try to do, we try to tell them the learning goal of the lesson ... We ask that they write that. So when we’re in class they always write it into their warm up. They copy their learning goal. That’s the first thing. That’s the habit we try to instill as we have that projected every day and then they come in and they just copy down the learning goal and then a lot of times will do warm up. Like either the teacher or I will introduce it then give them time …

P4 addressed ways he ensured assignments were received:

I’ve done mail. Parents have been willing to pick things up, I think. And then students just bring things in when they are here … Sometimes it’s as easy as just printing something off that would normally be online by giving it to him ahead of time. But sometimes it’s more elaborate for things like projects and things I may need to print off resources for him, and just send them with him. I’ve kinda had to work with his specific teachers and say what can we do?
He went on to outline a typical day in his hybrid learning model which entailed the same three students in class at a time for two days a week. He noted the amount of time spent on responsibilities relating to IEP caseload management:

Like during my school day I think that I spent probably three hours directly working with students and probably another three doing paperwork: two-way logs [COVID attendance] and transportation logs. I printed off attendance reports and things … monotonous paperwork done. So probably three hours of each and then probably an hour just doing those maintenance things with kids like yesterday for instance, a kid fell down when he came in so I spent the entire first hour my day filling out an incident report, calling Mom, and getting him an ice pack, you know and all these things.

During the fully virtual learning, P4 shared considerations made:

I would print of things and I might highlight the things that are key information. I know one example—he was in a health class and they did a study of, they had to pick a subject and research it. He did Autism because it obviously makes sense for him and we printed off all the information—some printouts of information that you could use to create this presentation. The rest of the class had to use a PowerPoint and find their own information. We provided the information and did like a poster.

He later shared his concerns regarding teaching during fully virtual learning, “When it was 100% virtual it was just not a good situation for most kids. So, the hybrid—we can make it work with these alternative assignments.”

**Challenges**

**Challenges While Providing Academic Support.** P2, teaching in a fully virtual district, talked about the challenges of schedules, in particular the lack of communication over students’ schedules.

It’s the scheduling. It’s really frustrating that schedules, we’ve been in our semester weeks now and it’s really frustrating, that some students still don’t have a complete schedule … people’s schedules are being changed but there’s no communication. They’ll change a student’s schedule but they don’t tell the student. [They] are a very big headache. I’ve spent a lot of time reviewing my student schedules … it still is pretty frustrating when you have students who are in the wrong classes … and I still have students who don’t even have a full schedule. We have like missing fourth period or a missing third period and … I wish that they would schedule students with special needs first to get them into teamed classes instead of last and then all of a sudden they’re trying
to find open spots in these classes, and I’ve heard like oh, this is closed, this is closed, this closed, when it wasn’t two weeks ago.

His concerns highlighted how imperative it is to communicate effectively to minimize frustration, loss of time, and reactionary decisions.

P5 also bemoaned the difficulties with scheduling, ultimately to choose the path of least resistance. She confessed that she is “spread so thin that sometimes with the schedule, it’s like putting together a puzzle and then we have to kind of, we have to be the flexible ones.” She referred to special education as “our little island,” which seemed to be detached from general education. She went on, “It would be nice to feel like that [the schedule] was a priority and it’s not, you know … , so we have to just make it work and go ahead.”

Participants shared their technology experiences while providing academic support in the virtual classroom. Finding alternative means of communication was an issue overcome by P1. She shared, “I have one of my kids … they have they don’t have good Wi-Fi—they run out, but he has Snapchat through his hotspot, so that’s how I communicate with him.”

P2 shared his challenge to interact with students in a timely manner:

The thing that I do struggle with though is letting the students know when they get off task. There’s no way to have an individual conversation. You know it’s either I have to out you in front of everybody and say, “Hey, make sure you’re doing this!”

Not only is technology in the classroom an Appropriate Learning environment concern, but P2 had concern over students’ inadequate home setting for virtual learning and their ability to lean away from school.

I’m thinking of those classes or those homes where it’s so loud or there’s a lot of things going on and then everybody’s on the internet, I’ve had some problems too, or iPhone, sketchy Internet and all that kind of stuff. So we’re not penalizing anybody for it, we’re just trying to make sure, trying to redirect them and make sure that if they, you know, to follow along as they can.
P4 had “two students that cannot do work at home and have to have alternative assignments.” P3 shared his frustration to provide academic support while students conducted surreptitious and lazy behavior without experiencing repercussions for their inappropriate behavior. He said they cheated “like crazy on their math stuff” because of the ease of access to information on the internet. When accused with cheating, they often confess, “Yeah, it’s a lot easier.” P3 also queried the abundance of student learning options from which to choose and the pressures placed on teachers associated with those choices:

I just feel like there’s so many options for these kids—you could go virtual, you can we can go three days a week, then we can hopefully go 5 days a week. There’s so many options. Teachers are being pulled everywhere … and I kinda see that as a negative. It makes things more difficult for what you want to choose, you gotta have a teacher for every situation. It just makes it hard.

P4 pointed to inconsistency in software use:

Now uniformity is where we get into an issue because every teacher is a different you know when we talk about Padlits and Quizlet and Ed puzzles and Kahoot, and all these … I mean my brain gets spinning and I’m right in it. So, these kids that couldn’t care less about all these apps and things that are trying to navigate it. So I’d like to see more uniformity—some common software that we’re using—an app that we’re using. Every teacher is trying to do it differently and that’s fine. They are all trying to find their niche but it’s a lot for the kids to get through the verbiage to actually get to the content—I’ve got to log in here, and remember this password, how do I get here, all right, now that I’m here, what’s the assignment? It can take a half hour to get there.

P5 shared the frustration she had in prioritizing time to prepare students “to use the technology.” Basic information technology skills was quite a challenge for “some students like my nonreaders, having time to actually look at the Google classroom platform and teach them how to use the email and the text to speech and all that they needed it.”

Two participants struggled with adjusting practices established to ensure accommodations while implementing the IEP. P5 talked about adjusting hands-on activities while maintaining the social distancing directive. She explained her predicament.
So what I really struggled with—in person and remotely is my proximity to students. So as a special educator I am so hands-on with them all the time and I’ve not been able to do that. Where I would normally have students sitting right at my desk with me and we would work through the problems together, I can’t do that and then when we went virtual. I had special ed students that even had a hard time logging into the machines. Normally it would be hand-on-hand showing them how to use the technology. And not being able to actually physically be with the student has been very difficult for me.

In much the same way P3 struggled to maintain his regular routine.

What’s difficult right now is giving the students the marker and having them go up there [to the board]. Being a team, pairing up together, stuff like that. I’m catching myself saying, **Hey, come up to the board, use this marker, or go turn to your partner and show your papers that you were doing and compare your answers.**

**Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students**

**Providing Socioemotional Support**

The emerging theme Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students became apparent as participants shared their thoughts regarding advocating for LRE and student emotional well-being. P1 shared,

When we were on our hybrid model, our Wednesdays were our intervention day, so we brought 20 kids in every Wednesday that had an IEP or 504 to either get specially designed instruction, remediation, or just some basic help. So, we were able to do that. Now that we are virtual, we can still do that. So currently right now, we have, I believe, 12 kids coming into the school every day. We are not sitting with them all day, but they are in the building and if they need anything, we’re there and we can help.

P3 shared his intent on providing an appropriate learning environment: “So when we did online stuff, I pushed super hard for my students to come in the building.” P3 also shared his concern over hidden stresses students may be facing related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

I think kids are doing well. I think the ones that are here I feel like are not as tense as the other ones. I think the kids some kids who chose to stay virtual some are athletes and don’t want to have to sit out of their games. There are multiple reasons for them not being here other than being scared of COVID.

P4 talked about mental health and advised “getting parents on board because they are at home so much with their parents now, you know, making sure their mental health is in a position where
they can be successful because being home more isn’t always better.” All three participants experienced concern that students would not receive appropriate services without intervention, which they were able to provide.

**Challenges**

Participants talked about the importance of the human touch and connection. P1 reflected on her own observations of colleagues during virtual learning: “… Some teachers struggle to engage virtually with kids. They don’t know how to have relational capacity even over a computer screen.” Understanding the impact of human connections in the lives of students, she offered some words of wisdom:

> Build that relational capacity. You still have to know your kids. You still have to check in with them like they were sitting in your classroom. You have to know what their temperature is. You have to know how they’re feeling. You have to know. [General education] teachers will get on and say, OK, this is what we’re doing today. Here you go. See you tomorrow.

She went on to explain, “You know that remote for a special education student who has difficulties, there are so many things that go on that make remote learning so difficult … feels very robotic and inhumane to a lot of our kids.” Similarly, P2 shared the “awkward thing about teaching online.” “… Students don’t turn their cameras on,” which means “there’s not a whole lot of that genuine chemistry back and forth.” Likewise, P3 said, “I know every kid by name that that comes in and I feel like you’re just a number if you are just in the virtual …” He reflected on his time as a student in college and made comparisons with his past experience to draw a parallel to the present time, “I felt that way even in college—like online classes, I hated it because I didn’t feel like I knew the professor and he didn’t know me. I was just a picture on the screen.”

P3 also talked about the loss of opportunity to learn the “hidden” curriculum. He shared, I think we lose the piece of the lesson you learn when you go to school when you do it virtually. I really dislike online school. I think getting up then being on time
somewhere—that’s a skill that you learn without realizing it. Holding kids accountable for getting up and getting dressed—just little stuff like that.

P4 had a similar response to virtual learning. “When it was 100% virtual, it was just not a good situation for most kids …” It was somewhat a relief when the building transitioned from fully remote to the hybrid model school. P4 commented on how he felt coming back to students, recognizing the importance of school life in providing opportunities for social interactions and human development:

Despite what’s going on and everything there’s still somebody out there. I keep coming back to that because I think that’s far too often an overlooked part of what we do. I felt like when we started back in this format from virtual it was like they came in and it was like OK, you gotta do this and this and this and this and it was like, *I need take a step back and talk to them for a little bit because they’re excited just to see us.* It wasn’t all about schoolwork and giving them assignments. It was also about getting to see us in person.

P4 offered his insight on the inability to practice social skills:

Kids don’t talk to each other like they normally do—laugh, poke fun at each other, whatever it may be. At lunch they sit at opposite sides of a table with a plexiglass barrier between them … being able to practice appropriate social skills with kids their own age and things like that putting them in situations where they can do that—that’s been difficult.

**Sharing Knowledge**

**Providing Teacher Support**

The emerging theme Sharing Knowledge to providing teacher support revealed the need to inform general education teachers about alternative methods of learning. Earlier, P4 talked about the need to be flexible in “letting kids show that they learn different ways.” Now on a hybrid schedule, P4 shared his angst as he approached a new semester, “It’s the end of the semester and we just started a new one so now I have to go out and a lot of those teachers change so I have to sell this” (referring to advocating on behalf of his students).
Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic as Special Education Teachers Fulfill Their Role While Providing Inclusion

Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher

The emerging theme Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher became apparent as two participants talked about the benefit of online teaching to provide the opportunity to increase academic support. This was demonstrated by giving additional attention to students.

P1 shared,

There have been some beautiful things that have come from this and one of them being, the individual attention that we can give the kids that we can’t give them during the school day … [Google Classroom] allows me to modify right on the spot for those kids. … our staff allows us to be a coteacher in any class that they have a caseload student. I don’t need to do anything per se in Google Classroom, but at least I can see what they’re working on.

She explained,

I’m not getting in those classes every day, but when I’m on a Zoom call with the kid and they say, I’m really struggling this assignment, I can get right into that class, read what the criteria says, read what we have to do, and then you know, scaffold it or make accommodations right on the fly.

P2 shared the same discovery, “What I found I can do on online is I can actually go and see them. Since it is on Google I can open up their assignment and see them typing or not typing on their assignment.” P2 also talked about school leadership facilitating ease of access to connect students to class schedule. “They were really good about having every teacher put their class codes on a spreadsheet.” He explained further: “A big part of the first part of trimesters is getting students connected with classes and I can look up any teacher’s code.”

Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students

The emerging theme Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students became apparent as three participants noted behavior had decreased during online learning. P5 shared, “We don’t have any behaviors. Like we have a RTC (Responsible Thinking
Classroom designed to help students develop self-discipline), not just in my class, school-wide and that thing’s been empty all year.”

The same response was echoed by P4: “So students are here two days a week right now. Half of them on Monday, Tuesday, the other half Thursday, Friday, and with that limited exposure there just there’s not the behavior ’cause they can survive two days.” Likewise, P2 shared, “We don’t deal with a whole lot of discipline issues. We don’t deal with a lot of interruptions. There is not the stress of that.”

**Research Question 5 Responsibilities & Duties**

**Providing Academic Support**

*Changes in Organization and Structure*

The emerging theme Providing Academic Support became apparent as participants addressed changes in the organization and structure of the classroom. Two participants shared how the organization and structure of classes evolved in their buildings. P1 talked about reduction in staffing and an increase in class size. She shared,

> We are not sitting with them all day, but they are in the building and if they need anything, we’re there and we can help.” She continued, “Last year before COVID we had three full-time special education Level 1 teachers at the high school. When COVID hit and we had to make all these shifts and you know staffing changes, I am the only full-time. We went from three to me … like in our academic support class that you saw, there are 18 students in there. That’s a lot for one class.

Her comments indicated a level of anxiety while facing great expectations.

As a fully remote teacher, P2 said,

> I set up for finals to do final exams, I also set up just a whole new classroom for students for a modified final exam … you have to select and then know who gets what, as you do in regularly class—You have to know who’s going to get what version of the exam. So there are a lot of moving parts.
**RTI Schedules**

P3 talked about changes in RTI schedules and shared that his school provided “after school help every day from 2:30 to 3, but then also during COVID times it was 4 o’clock to 8 o’clock.”

**Challenges**

In contrast, P4 addressed difficulties his building experienced in providing additional services:

With COVID, it’s made it difficult for students to meet at extra times or things like that. So our RTI at high school has a long way to go. I think our elementaries have it a little bit better figured out so.

Three participants addressed motivation and the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to motivate students. P1 shared some motivation strategies that worked for her during the first trimester of hybrid learning:

[Find a way] to increase desire or motivation to perform in class … so have fun. Try to have a little fun with the kids … We play charades … We have a guest DJ where the kids get to play the music.

While easy for P1, this was not the case for P4, who informed, “Now where we’re having the issues is—attendance … I have students who are just completely falling off the cliff this year.” He acknowledged his responsibility “to put things in place to motivate them to wanna attend meets and wanna do this classwork outside [the classroom].” Likewise, P2 shared his process for communicating to other teachers his concerns regarding student participation:

I scheduled meets with them but a lot of times students don’t come to the meets … I tried to make a I tried to call home. If I’m not able to connect with anybody, I’ll look up there who their contact teacher is, who their special education person is and try to write them a note. And say … [is] logging in but they are not present. They’re not paying attention, they’re not with us during class time—just for your information.”
P2 also addressed fulfilling responsibilities in managing his IEP caseload. He talked about additional paperwork to demonstrate accountability of duties and explained, “Right now, since we are remote, we have had to log all of our interactions … it’s for our caseload …” P2 understood the logic behind the decision but had objections:

… and it’s for the district to, if we get audited, we have to present what we’ve been doing but at the same time it’s like—*can you just trust me, that I’m doing this. Why do I have to write all this down …* We’ve had to log everything that we’re doing for our caseload. And so I do it and then I have to write down exactly what I’ve done.

P2 indicated his frustration to the unnecessary time commitment required.

**Opportunities Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic as Special Education Teachers Fulfill Their Responsibilities and Duties While Providing Inclusion**

**Managing IEP Caseload**

The emerging theme Managing IEP Caseload became apparent as three participants talked about ways in which information technology allowed them to maximize communication.

Participants shared their serendipitous moments regarding parent involvement, increasing parental confidence in teachers’ sincerity toward students. P1 shared,

The other beautiful thing that has happened is the connection with parents. Parents are also struggling with technology. They don’t understand how to use Google Classroom, they don’t understand how to use the infinite campus (a system to notify parents of student progress), and they don’t know how to navigate. They don’t know how to help their kids, so I have been able to have more contact with parents and students at the same time this last school year than I have in 27 years.

P2 shared, “I texted and called parents probably more than I ever had and I’m giving out my personal cell phone number …”

P4 shared,

I’ve noticed this year, I’ve had more parent involvement than ever, and I think it’s actually helped more than ever. Again, I mentioned last time how those difficult conversations become easier when you have a relationship and those parents have talked to you before and they know that you know something about their kid. That you see their
personality and you see their likes and dislikes and it’s not just another kid, you know. They can see that you take ownership.

**Summary of Major Themes**

A composite description of the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher’s life in the inclusive setting was provided to highlight the closely related and often overlapped themes. Roles and Responsibilities & Duties, Interactions, Inclusive Practices, Unique Qualities, and COVID-19 Crisis Adjustments are themes used to encapsulate the experiences of high school special education teachers while they work to create inclusion during this present time.

Data revealed emerging themes under the major theme Roles, which were defined as (a) teaching students as a special education teacher, (b) demonstrating a breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students, and (c) sharing knowledge. Under the emerging theme Teaching Students as a Special Education Teacher, the researcher examined ways in which participants engaged in academic support and implementation of components of the IEP to provide services to students. Under the emerging theme Demonstrating a Breadth of Knowledge to Understand the Needs of Students, the researcher examined ways in which participants determined the most appropriate practices to provide services to students on their caseload. Provision of socioemotional support, appropriate learning environments, advocacy, and the implementation of the IEP were predominant services. Under the emerging theme Sharing Knowledge, the researcher examined ways in which participants provided teacher support to understand the IEP and assistance in providing access to the general education curriculum.

Data also revealed emerging themes under the major theme Responsibilities and Duties, which were defined as (a) providing academic support, (b) providing teacher support, and (c) managing the IEP caseload. Under the emerging theme Academic Support, the researcher
examined ways in which participants engaged in student activities related to MTSS/RTI, small group instruction, and coteaching. Under the emerging theme Providing Teacher Support, the researcher examined ways in which participants supported the general education teacher in providing access to the general education curriculum. Sharing knowledge, data collection and assessing student learning, and establishing collaboration, communication, and parity were paramount. Under the emerging theme Managing the IEP Caseload, the researcher examined ways in which participants adhered to IDEA regulations to maintain IEP compliancy.

**Major Themes: Roles, Responsibilities, & Duties**

Roles, Responsibilities, & Duties provide the framework to discover four additional major themes: Interactions, as high school special education teachers respond to the expectations and demands placed upon them to provide academic and teacher supports; Inclusive Practices, which encompass participants knowledge of students aligned with strategies found to be effective in teaching them; Unique Qualities, which underscore the special educators’ specialty; and COVID-19 Crisis Adjustments, which identify the pandemic’s impact on academic and teacher support, socioemotional support, advocacy, learning environments, and IEP caseload management.

**Major Theme: Interactions**

Participants sought to develop avenues of collegiality, trust, and joint ownership as demonstrated by the following statements:

We’ve had to establish that trust you know for the gen ed staff to trust us that, including these kids, is going to be beneficial.

Building confidence.

I’m there to work with them.

… build that teamwork.
Interactions took place also while participants lived out their role of demonstrating a breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students and sharing knowledge. They provided support while minimizing conflict, collaborated while establishing parity, disseminated information, and focused on building relationships through an attitude of teamwork. Challenges were met with tactfulness. Some participants were met with interference from general education teachers while trying to provide academic support as a special education teacher. In addition, general education teachers were found to be lacking in fulfilling student IEP accommodations. Participants were either sympathetic to oversights of general education teachers, taking the opportunity to encourage students to ask for accommodations to develop self-advocacy skills or looked for ways to hold them accountable to meeting the requirements of the law.

**Major Theme: Inclusive Practices**

As participants fulfilled their Role, Inclusive Practices were identified while seeking to know and teach students. Inclusive practices were also identified as they met their Responsibilities while providing academic support. Inclusive practices included creating a learning milieu to embody LRE, a sense of belonging, respect, and trust. While providing academic supports, participants were influenced by the UDL model and several instructional practices—task analysis, learning from peers, modeling, set routine and structure, hands-on group work, and pulling mixed groups.

**Major Theme: Unique Qualities**

Participants believed their unique qualities were made evident in their ability to provide teacher support. Sharing expert knowledge of the IEP and specific training were identified. Forty percent of participants talked about their responsibilities as a consultant to other teachers. One participant had the responsibility of consultant to other special education teachers in addition to
being a special education caseload teacher to students identified with emotional impairments. Another described her role as consultant to general education teachers.

Also identified as unique to their responsibility of providing academic support was the skill to differentiate instruction and coteach using various models. As participants met the expectations of their role to demonstrate a breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students, they were able to address socioemotional issues and inform general education teachers of practices effective in benefitting students receiving services.

**Major Theme: COVID-19 Crisis Adjustments**

Participants were required to find diverse ways of collaboration and communication to provide services to students. Participants shared how they continued to fulfill their role of demonstrating a breadth of knowledge to understand the needs of students, in particular, being mindful of the emotional needs of their students, advocating on behalf of their students, and finding ways to provide students with an environment conducive to learning within the constraints of the pandemic. Further, much of their time was spent providing academic support as a special education teacher. As participants continued to meet the requirements of the responsibilities and duties, they experienced changes in organization and structure of classes, which led to a reduction in staffing and an increase in class sizes for some. These changes also resulted in modifications to the implementation of RTI. An increase in the amount of paperwork required to demonstrate teacher accountability to tasks and student attendance was also experienced.

**Challenges**

Participants struggled to adjust their usual classroom activities to fall within the guidelines of the COVID-19 school restrictions and voiced their concerns regarding student lack
of human touch and connection when being taught virtually. Unrealistic expectations of engagement by general education teachers were scrutinized and participants worried that students would miss out on social and academic development because of remote and virtual learning.

Appropriate scheduling was an issue as some participants determined which would be best for their students. Technical issues arose highlighting the difficulty some students had in securing efficient Wi-Fi connection and the amount of time some participants took to prepare students to use technology. In addition, concerns arose regarding consistency in the software use, recognizing that an abundance of choice would hinder “uniformity.” Likewise, an abundance of online learning options might create complications for future decisions for teachers and students when deciding what to teach and how to learn.

**Opportunities**

Participants shared ways in which technology enhanced their ability to meet the expectation of their roles, responsibilities, and duties. Participant saw a significant increase in the level of communication with students and parents. The use of technology equipped participants to monitor and assess students more efficiently. Participants also found virtual learning to be a better fit for some students and student behavior issues were kept to a minimum.

**Documentation Review**

**Document Review on Academic Supports**

Both the MiMTSS Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (Secondary-Level Edition) and the Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory Reading Screening Items for Secondary Schools were reviewed to evaluate academic support in the general education classroom. The research identified items pertaining to the study at the tier one level and found that literacy skills focused
on word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation were addressed in each lesson observed (R-TFI Item 1.7. The school uses a formal procedure for selecting Content Area Reading Strategies to provide content area reading instruction). Instructional routines were implemented by all participants. Provision of inclusive supports for English Language Learners was evident with one participant (R-TFI Item 1.8. An instructional routine is available for each content area reading strategy that has been adopted for use school-wide).

Participants were also observed engaging in differentiated instruction based on grade level content and four participants \((N = 5)\) referred in some degree to task of data collection (R-TFI Item 1.10. Department teams develop instructional plans to improve students’ understanding of the content area). While it was evident that class-wide expectations for student behavior were established, the researcher did not observe these specifically; however, one participant was observed informing students of the need to take care of their chrome books (R-TFI Item 1.11. Class-wide expectations for student behavior and taught; R-TFI Item 1.12. Procedures are implemented for common classroom activities).

In addition, all but one participant was observed using explicit instruction to deliver instruction while teaching in small groups (R-TFI Item 2.5. The school uses a formal process for selecting evidence-based reading interventions).

It was evident that the practice of purposeful grouping was used to determine placement of students based on academic and social abilities (R-TFI Item 2.7. Intervention groups include students with similar needs; R-TFI Item 2.8. The school alters interventions variables to intensify reading intervention supports).
The Path Forward Strategic Action Plan (Michigan.gov, 2020c)

As special education teachers, all participants were engaged in interventions to meet the requirements of IDEA Part B. Three out of five participants addressed the use of personal curriculums to circumvent the strident requirements of the general education curriculum.

“[Personal curriculums have] helped our graduation rate. It’s helped us be more comfortable with giving kids the opportunity to try,” was noted by P4. P1 said,

We don’t have a lot of electives at the high school so we’re writing personal curriculums for our students … Our curriculum is geared toward the kid going to a four-year university. Well, newsflash! You know, not all kids are going to do that. We have kids that have no desire to go college. They want to go right to work or they want to go to the military, so I wish we could tailor programming without a personal curriculum, but we just can’t.

P3 said,

Everybody’s in the general classroom whether they get a personal curriculum or not. I probably see 10 kids with a personal curriculum in math. I tried to push that as much as possible because on their applications they would have the mark but they’re not they don’t have a high school diploma and they won’t get hired.

In each case, participants indicated the relevance of the personal curriculum to the transition plan and postsecondary goals (Phase 1). All participants demonstrated complete commitment to providing supports to all students in the classroom and voiced their concern regarding the socioemotional aspects of the student during and upon return to school post COVID-19 crisis (Phase 2).

Document Review on COVID-19 Procedures

On June 30, 2020, Governor Whitmer issued Executive Order 2020-142 that requires every school district and nonpublic school to develop and adopt a COVID-19 preparedness and response plan (“Preparedness Plan”) informed by the Michigan Return to School Roadmap.
The researcher reviewed guidelines identified as *recommended*, *strongly recommended*, and *required* (Michigan.gov, 2020b) and compared teacher behavior to expectations stated. During Phases 1-3 in-person instruction was not permitted. With remote only instruction, it was *strongly recommended* to be aware of the mental and socioemotional health of students. Data showed that all participants demonstrated an awareness of this in their practice and felt they were adequately trained, although unclear was the provision of timely, responsive, and ongoing training/professional development, resources for staff self-care, including resiliency strategies. Participants discussed their roles and responsibilities during remote instruction indicating practice in reviewing students’ IEPs, IFSPs, and 504 plans to reflect data collection and relevance of accommodation, online interventions and support services, collaborative efforts to determine best practices in instruction, and assessment of student progress. These activities were conducted through Google Teams. Those students considered *at risk* were brought into the classroom as soon as possible.

The directive for Phase 4 allowed in-person instruction with required safety protocols. These required protocols were seen as facial coverings worn in hallways, common areas, and in classrooms by all students. In addition, classroom materials were to be limited to small groups, having been disinfected or assigned and used by individual students. Limited use of classroom materials was an issue addressed by two participants who stated not being able to have students come to the board or participate in group work and being restricted in using *hand over hand* technique to scaffold instruction. Strongly recommended was the six feet apart placement of student desks, with class sizes reflecting adherence to the requirement. This was observed as
schools divided classrooms alphabetically by students’ last names to create smaller class sizes and schedules to accommodate the hybrid format of instruction.

All participants engaged in hybrid or remote instruction that included best practices but to say these practices are efficient for blended or remote learning will be confirmed when students are assessed and evaluated, purposes for which this study was not designed; however, differentiated support for students was observed. The inclusion of social-emotional learning (SEL) was delivered on a regular basis by one participant. Four of the participants discussed at some level the need for SEL, and district websites either provided online resources or restated provisions outlined in the Michigan Safe Schools Roadmap initiative.

Participants shared if and how they were able to plan and assess with coteachers to establish structures for delivery methods. Not all were able to do so. Four out of five participants talked about ways in which they contacted students and parents at the teacher level to meet the requirement of additional communication systems. Two out of five participants talked about afterschool RTI and Outreach programs to support students in need of additional support beyond classroom hours. One participant talked about the need to modify assignments for a student due to online inaccessibility.

Schools were required to ensure that all students and families have adequate connectivity and the devices necessary to successfully engage in and complete schoolwork. The study revealed that two out five participants had difficulties with students being able to connect to systems. P4 shared how one student had assignment requirements modified because of no access.

To monitor student attendance during the hybrid schedules, districts were highly recommended to develop systems that would daily track online attendance. Participant bemoaned the fact that this was a requirement but understood the rationale, that being to demonstrate
accountability. It was also highly recommended that teachers conduct an assessment on the quality of student work and provide feedback to students and families. The extent of fulfilling this requirement was difficult to measure; however, three participants talked about the check sheets for assignment completion and appropriate behavior, one participant talked out a quick progress monitoring strategy, and all referred to graphic organizers to complete and prepare for unit testing.

RTFI Item 1.10 of the MiMTSS Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (Secondary-Level Edition), referring to the development of instructional plans to improve students understanding of the content area, was congruent to the intent of the Michigan Return to School Roadmap initiative.

**Guidance to Address Return to Learn for Students With IEPs (MDE-OSE, 2020)**

MDE-OSE strongly recommends districts’ use of the contingency learning plan as a process to support districts and families in planning through the uncertainties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. MDE-OSE wrote the following guidance to support the return to school for students with IEPs ages three to 26 during the pandemic:

a. In-person instruction: Districts should follow recommended guidelines of the Return to School Roadmap, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and/or local health departments, as well as any further executive orders or legislation, when considering whether to resume in-person instruction, including conducting evaluations and observations of students

**Districts and Schools**

Based on website communications, schools implemented practices based on school districts’ version of the Return to School Roadmap. Weekly reports are made on cases and procedures for notifying anyone who has come into contact with those who have tested positive for COVID-19. Parents staff and students are encouraged to wear a cloth face covering or mask
when in close proximity with others, practice frequent hand washing, stay home when sick, and continue to screen for potential symptoms of illness before coming school each day.

**Triangulation**

Observations and document review were conducted to increase the accuracy of the interview findings. Collected data from participants’ interviews aligned with observations in the classroom setting. The researcher was able to verify strategies used for classroom management and academic support as well as steps taken toward planning lessons and assessing students. In addition, the researcher confirmed the accounts of participants related to implementing inclusion and their interactions with general education teachers. Similarly, the documents were compared at the school and district level. Data were found to be aligned with mandates issued by the Michigan Department of Education. While MTSS was found to be implemented in varying degrees at each school building, the implementation of some were more aligned to state mandates than others. Likewise, federal mandates were acknowledged at the building level and participants were seen to be meeting the requirements by providing support to students and teachers and management of IEPs.

**Summary**

Findings were presented in Chapter IV according to the major themes and subthemes that emerged from in-depth analysis. Major themes included (a) Roles, (b) Responsibilities and Duties, (c) Interactions, (d) Inclusive Practices, (e) Unique Qualities, and (f) the COVID-19 Crisis Adjustments. Each theme received long and careful consideration. Subthemes were included to provide deeper understanding of the context and to add more perspective. High school special education inclusion teachers shared insight into their lived experiences related to inclusive practices, highlighting what they do, how they do it, and the impact of their actions.
Researching the phenomenon during a health crisis of global proportion added a new and
dynamic layer of exploration. These insights were further illuminated as teachers shared their
experience while under the constraints of a global pandemic.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the researcher presents a discussion of the results and their implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future studies. Supported by the existing literature, the study’s findings emerged from analysis of participants’ responses related to the research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do special educators use their time to respond to the demands of their job?

2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level?

3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in districts across Southwest Michigan?

4. As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting, what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their value added?

5. What is the experience of high school special education inclusion teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?

The purpose of this study was to identify practices implemented on a regular basis specifically by special education inclusion teachers at the high school level. The researcher sought to make meaning of the lived experiences of inclusion teachers as they provided services to promote inclusion, and in so doing develop an understanding of the context in which special education teachers operate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
During the initial stages of the study, the COVID-19 pandemic insidiously worked its way across the globe, leaving in its wake a state of confusion and anxiety. Even now, research informs that of those contracting the virus, 10% will suffer long-term effects (Healthline, 2021; Mayo Clinic, 2021). The researcher quickly realized that conditions were drastically changing and the education arena would not be exempt. Thoughts began to flow: What is the lived experience of COVID-19? What is the lived experience of writing a dissertation during a pandemic? What is the lived experience of teaching during a pandemic? The first question became a living reality for 330 million Americans as the country fought through the onslaughters of the “unseen enemy” or “invisible enemy” (Chauhan et al., 2021). The second question became a personal experience, which led the researcher to answers related to the third. Various teachers were contacted with the hopes of finding participants willing to share their experience as they navigated through this confusing time of educating one of our most vulnerable populations. What the researcher found were inclusion teachers who were seeking to fully engage in inclusive practices as districts worked through new systems and procedures.

The purpose of school is

to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being … to develop the intellect, to serve social needs, to contribute to the economy, to create an effective work force, to prepare students for a job and career, to promote a social or political system … it seeks to encompass all the dimensions of human experience. (Foshay, 1991)

This surely was the aim of teachers who relentlessly “showed up” for work every day to sit in front of their computer screen and try their best to bring that personal touch to those on the other side.
Implication of Findings

From the researcher’s standpoint, the present study’s findings consider convergent and divergent data and concurrently compares them with existing literature. According to the interpretation of the study data, the global pandemic impacts the meaning of inclusion for high school special education inclusion teachers. In response, they engage in activities allowing them the opportunity to develop an understanding of their students so that they can provide meaningful educational experiences in a small group setting and in the larger general education classroom setting. Special education teachers in the southwest region of Michigan consider their training to place them in a position of authority in their field. As such, they are the experts in providing socioemotional and academic interventions to meet the needs of the general education population as well as students receiving services, and to share what they know with general education teachers. As special educators operate in these unique capacities, they are met with challenges yet take on responsibilities to provide academic and teacher support while managing their caseload individual education plans.

Beneath each research question, the researcher demonstrated the connection to the study findings and previous literature. Findings are discussed according to major and subthemes.

Research Question 1

How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?

Roles and responsibilities and duties were separated to reflect participants’ responses to interview questions. Interview questions relating to the role of participants were worded as follows:
1. How would you describe your role as a special education teacher in your current capacity?

2. How have you built on your training to become more effective when working with students in inclusive setting?

Responsibilities and duties were gleaned from several questions:

1. How do your services differ from that of the general education teacher?

2. How have you built on your training to become more effective when working with students in inclusive setting?

3. What do you find works best when working in an inclusive setting?

Phenomenological research is based on uncovering meaning, which made it a perfect method to discover where high school special education teachers place value and meaning at the high school level. Value and meaning are placed in actions and beliefs that are seen to make a difference and have the greatest impact (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). How is that measured? For this research it was measured by what teachers chose to do, not just as a directive but on their own volition. One teacher shared, “Once I held to my own volition and like I know what I'm talking about, I know these strategies work,” he felt empowered to initiate a program designed to encourage interrelationships between students and foster the concept of inclusion.

Themes discovered in the analysis of this study align with Weiss and Lloyd’s (2002) results. Using methodology similar to the current study, the previous study used a constant comparative analysis to reveal four roles played out by special education teachers in the general education setting: providing support, teach content in alternative setting, teach selective portions of the curriculum to the main class, and shared delivery of the content to all students. In the case of the current study, Academic Support and Providing Teacher Support were identified as
subthemes of Responsibilities & Duties. Teaching selective portions of the curriculum to the main class and shared delivery of the content to all students converged with the current research data, where 60% of the participants carried out this role.

The current data also revealed high school special education teachers’ practice of data collection under the major theme of Responsibilities and subtheme Providing Teacher Support and the sharing of knowledge under the major theme Roles and subtheme Sharing Knowledge (particularly regarding the IEP). These were also areas identified in Vannest et al. (2011) and Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003). Related, Washburn-Moses (2005) in a study to determine and understand the roles and responsibilities of secondary special education teachers, suggested that further inquiry be made into whether teachers are providing access to the general education curriculum. Findings of the current study confirm that this is taking place. Where more than 75% of classes were in self-contained setting according to Washburn-Moses, the current research demonstrated that 60% of participants’ instruction was conducted in the general education setting.

Research Question 2

How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level?

Special education teachers are aware of the implications of their interactions with general education teachers, understanding that what happens with general education teachers affects relationships with students. High school inclusion special education teachers recognize the need to share their knowledge and provide teacher support to create positive interactions.

Findings in the current study demonstrated that special education teachers in this context understand the impact their expertise has on the efficacy of general education teachers to
effectively teach. The current research demonstrated that collaboration, consultation, and cooperation are seen as key components in bringing the complexities of inclusive practices together and reflected themes found in Bakken and Obiakor (2016) and Chao et al. (2018), both identifying collaboration as one of the key components to teacher efficacy. Earlier studies also aligned with the current study’s results related to collaborative teaching (Bear & Proctor, 1990; Friend & Barron, 2016; Klinger et al., 1998; Magiera & Zigmond, 2005).

When asked questions to illuminate the interaction between teachers in an inclusive climate, establishing a collaborative work environment in a spirit of parity was expressed by several participants. Participants noted that it was important to communicate support, minimize conflicting goals, and avoid confrontation. This featured under the major theme of Responsibilities and subtheme of Providing Teacher Support.

In the current study, it was shared that lack of collaboration impeded the quality of lessons, consequently affecting the special education teacher’s ability to teach and provide academic support. Related were the results of Weiss and Lloyd (2002), where lack of staffing reflected on the quality of instruction and the ability to demonstrate teacher parity in the classroom. Failure to coordinate and schedule planning times were challenges participants expressed resulting from lack of collaboration. This aligned with previous studies highlighting the importance of joint planning (Bear & Proctor, 1990; Klinger et al., 1998; Scruggs et al., 2007).

The findings of the data revealed the tendency for general education teachers to lapse in adhering to the requirements of the IEP. This puts schools in a vulnerable position as they are no longer in compliance with special education regulations (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). The study revealed data indicating 40% of participants adopted the role of consultant. A possible solution
could be found in special education teachers moving beyond the classroom to provide a comprehensive service pertaining IDEA and other government requirements.

**Research Question 3**

What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in districts across Southwest Michigan?

Alluding to the importance of an appropriate mindset and disposition in a given situation, teachers took the opportunity to talk about collegiality and discernment as they shared their experiences of implementing inclusive practices. These were closely related to the subtheme Providing Teacher Support under the major theme Responsibilities & Duties. The study analysis revealed a strong drive to create a learning milieu to facilitate inclusion. This was a feature of the major theme Roles and the subtheme Knowing Students. Participants demonstrated awareness that an appropriate learning environment held value in establishing the least restrictive environment (OSERS, 1994). Special education teachers demonstrated their ability to know students and establish a positive classroom environment where prescriptive teaching and environmental modifications are made (Dunn, 1968; Wang, 1987).

The subtheme Teaching Students was demonstrated as teachers provided academic support and revealed instructional practices necessary to teaching students with learning disabilities. This aligned with several existing research where scaffolding support with modeling (Hughes et al., 2017; McLeskey & Brownell, 2015) and clearly defining learning goals objectives, student outcomes (Lenz et al., 1987) were identified.

**Research Question 4**

As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their value added?
While the qualities identified seem few, each represented significance. Data revealed the
major theme Responsibilities & Duties and the subthemes Providing Academic Support to
address coteaching, Teacher Support to address sharing expertise knowledge and specific
training in differentiated instruction, and IEP Caseload Management. Also evident was the major
theme Roles with subtheme Knowing Students to address providing socioemotional support.

These themes reflected endorsement requirements under Rule 81, of MARSE R
340.1781, which states that special education teachers have

knowledge, understanding, skills, and dispositions to: (i) Utilize research-based models, theories, and philosophies for teaching students with an array of disabilities within different placements, (ii) Assess students with disabilities for identification and teaching, and (iii) Implement accommodations and modifications for classroom, district, and statewide assessments, among other duties. (MARSE R 340.1781; MDE, 2021a)

Activities such as data collection, RTI instruction, resource room support and inclusion, accommodating and modifying curriculum, and IEP caseload management were specifically highlighted, which converges with previous data identifying specific responsibilities of special education teachers (Brown & Skow, 2009; Whitten et al., 2019). Content, Process, Projects, and Learning Environment formed the basis of differentiation as described by Tomlinson (1999). These descriptors aligned with activities highlighted in the current study data. Comparisons may also be made with MTSS initiatives at the state level, which targets social and emotional development in addition to academic improvement (Burns et al., 2016; MDE, 2021b; Salend, 2016; Samuels, 2016).

Research Question 5

What is the experience of high school special education inclusion teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?
At this point in time, seismic shifts in the way schools are managed are seen at the macro level of state and district operations. We, as a nation, are coming to terms with the huge changes that began in 2020. How do those changes translate at the micro level of the classroom?

Restrictive conditions under the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for high school special education teachers to be strident in their role and responsibilities. Data revealed the theme Responsibilities & Duties and subtheme Providing Academic Support as teachers revised existing MTSS procedures. This became the conduit for providing access to the general education curriculum. Teachers were required to find diverse ways to collaborate and communicate with team members to provide services.

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled us into a period of unprecedented times. How we rebound from the disruption of the crisis will say a lot about our resiliency as a person, group, school, country, etc. Gu and Day (2007) said of teachers, “Their resilient qualities do not merely serve the developmental progression; indeed, at the heart of the process, they interact with negative influences and constraints and develop in strength together with teachers’ professional qualities” (p. 1304). Under the major theme Responsibilities & Duties and subtheme Providing Teacher Support, the current study revealed that dispositions already associated with the special educator, such as creativity, flexibility, patience, and resilience, now rose to the surface to meet changes in organization and structure of classes (Dweck, 2008; Gu & Day, 2007)

**Opportunities**

Dweck (2008), in her account of the influence of mindset and success, informed that changeable ability and development through learning are the outcomes of a growth mindset. To this end, the pandemic offers opportunities to improve existing systems and generate new ideas. Data highlighted the theme of Responsibilities & Duties in this area revealing the use of
technology as a vehicle for providing academic support. Teachers felt equipped to monitor and assess students more efficiently and recognized that some students benefitted from remote learning. Data revealed that the major theme Role reflected the enhanced ability for teachers to communicate with parents and students and increase collaborative efforts with staff around student achievement.

**Concerns**

The data revealed that the human element was a point of concern. Under the major theme Roles, subtheme Knowing Students, it must be noted that unrealistic expectations placed on students to achieve academically may drive students to despondency and refusal to work. The data under this subtheme revealed a need for ensuring that social as well as academic supports are maintained. Also evident was data that identified mindfulness of students’ emotional needs, advocating on behalf of students, and establishing environments conducive to learning for students. This indicated the focus of teachers’ attention to the mental well-being of their students (Michigan.gov, 2020b).

The subtheme Teaching Students addressed the need to identify effective scheduling procedures to determine the appropriate learning environment, which must be considered under any circumstance but even more so under the current circumstances.

Ways in which the use of technology is implemented warrants attention. All participants used Google Classroom as a means for delivering instruction and monitoring student progress. Heggart and Yoo (2018) identified four key concepts necessary for the success of any learning platform: ease of access, collaboration, student voice/agency, and pace. These concepts align with data in the current study. Securing efficient Wi-Fi connection and preparing students to use technology were identified as concerns of access. The need for collaboration was highlighted in
subtheme Teaching Students, pointing to issues with inconsistency in the software used by teachers and an abundance of online learning options. A concern for special education is the continued development of desired learner behavior of their students as participants voiced their struggle to adjust usual classroom activities to implement the same level of accommodations and modifications. The challenge is to continue FAPE in the midst of a changing educational ecosystem. Jameson et al. (2020) address the difficulties of maintaining the integrity of the IEP but provide a cautionary warning to ensure the IEP is implemented with fidelity to remain in compliance with federal stipulations.

**Implications for Practice**

All participants commented on a shift in preparing students for employment rather than college and suggestions were made to make more accessible extracurricular activities and provide a broader scope of postsecondary possibilities. As such it would be beneficial to continue to work on mindset across all levels to recognize that all students are entitled to an appropriate education. Dunn (1968) posits that positioning the special educator as part of general education and “*not apart from*” it would acknowledge that all children have assets and deficits that are not permanently fixed (p. 14). These are attainable and beneficial as educators work together for the common good, recognizing that success is measured in a myriad of ways.

**Limitations**

Several limitations impacted the overall results of the study:

1. The replication of the study will be limited since the number of participants was relatively small.

2. The study could not be considered to reflect a sample of the general population since the experiences shared were of a sample that lacked ethnic diversity.
3. Under the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher was unable to be consistent in the recruitment process.

4. Observations were conducted remotely, limiting the researcher to visual and hearing senses only.

**Delimitations**

The current study was not designed to address student outcome.

**Future Studies**

1. Provide the space for special educators to flex their position of authority and expertise as students continue to create diversity in the classroom. Research the efficacy of special education teachers as consultant. Expand the role of the special educator to adopt the role of consultant during times of crisis, recognizing their expertise in knowing and teaching their students; their knowledge on the federal IDEA requirements of the IEP; and their skill in providing teacher and academic support.

2. Continue to improve online resources to develop assistive technology and dispositions that will lead to innovative change.

3. Develop a mixed-methods longitudinal research as an extension of the current study, focusing on themes to investigate change over time and student growth under the influence of the pandemic, particularly as it relates to student assessment and standardized testing (MDE, 2021).

4. Recruitment took place in areas that were identified as suburb, town, and rural. Conduct an extension of the current study to explore student social and academic success during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on physical locality.
5. Extend the study to look at how often and when inclusion is extended to low incidence groups to investigate the efficacy of the placement of students. How feasible is educating low and high incidence groups together? As one participant said, “Wouldn’t that be great though if every kid had an IEP. Every kid in gen ed and special ed. That’s the dream!”

Opportunities have emerged as the nation navigates the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Those challenges have accelerated the need to keep student equity front and center of the education debate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The study demonstrated how this takes place at a crucial time in history. Teachers are one of our greatest resources. Data showing areas that can be looked at for further research based on what did and did not take place during the pandemic can lead to innovative ideas. As the nation recovers from the COVID-19 crisis, keeping schools in America globally competitive will be the challenge. Collaboration between the general and special education teacher creates a symbiotic relationship that can become a powerhouse to enact dynamic and meaningful change for the future (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).
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Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval and Informed Consent
Date: October 16, 2020

To: Elizabeth Whitten, Principal Investigator
    Evelyn Phillips, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-10-15

Amy Naugle

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Understanding the Unique Role of Special Education Teachers and the Essence of the Special Education Teacher’s Life in the Inclusive Setting” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) October 15, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Western Michigan University
Department of Special Education and Literacy Studies

Principal Investigator:  Dr. Elizabeth Whitten
Student Investigator:  Evelyn Phillips
Title of Study:  Understanding the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher's life in the inclusive setting

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Using a phenomenological approach, the study is designed to explore what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function while in the inclusive setting. The purpose is three-fold - to depict the essence of the experience of determining types of strategies used by special education teachers in inclusive settings, to deliver an explanation of how a special education teacher’s time is spent, and to convey a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special educator at the secondary level in districts other than those classified as urban.

This study will also serve as Evelyn Phillips’ dissertation research project for the requirements of the Doctor of Special Education. If you decide to take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in two observations and a face-to-face interview. Observations will take place where you engage in inclusive teaching via an online application such as GoReact. The first will take place before the interview. The second observation will take place after the interview. The interview will be conducted by the student researcher through an online program such as WebEx. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted in a setting that suits your comfort. It will take no longer than 60 minutes. The second observation will be scheduled at the end of the interview. In all, your time in the study will be no more than 2 hours.

There are no foreseen risks to you while participating in this study beyond the loss of time. There are no anticipated benefits to you as a participant, however you may receive the satisfaction of sharing your experience to improve school systems and procedures. You may also feel a deeper sense of worth as you reflect on the responsibilities and impact of your duties: to the research, the results of the study may provide insight into further developing and improving effective measures in an inclusive classroom setting. The findings may also add to the existing body in literature regarding changes in teacher preparation and evaluation requirements and standards. Applied to the policy and political realm, findings may be used to assist local government agencies and accreditation organization in making informed decisions.
You are invited to participate in this research project titled, *Understanding the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher’s life in the inclusive setting*. The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. It is your choice to decide not to participate in this study.

**What are we trying to find in this study?**
This research will center around identifying types of strategies special education teachers use to support students in inclusive settings and how special education teachers use their professional time. The purpose is to provide a teacher’s perspective of what it means to be a special educator in a suburban school district. Questions to be answered are:

1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?

2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level?

3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in districts other than those classified as urban?

4. As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their value added?

**Who can participate in this study?**
This study is open to secondary level special education teachers who meet 4 specific criteria:

1. High school special education teacher in suburban school district
2. Co-taught for 3 years or more
3. Work in the inclusive setting
4. Recommended by Special Education Director/Supervisor to participate in study based on their co-teaching experience in inclusive setting

Individuals who are not eligible for this study will be teachers who do not meet the 4 criteria.
Where will this study take place?
Observations of teachers will be conducted while teaching virtually through a remote platform such as GoReact. Interviews will be conducted online at a time and place that is convenient to you.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Each observation will be 30 minutes in length. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. In addition, you will need to factor in the length of time it takes for you to review the transcript of your interview should you choose to participate in validating what was interpreted.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
After agreement is indicated, you will be asked to participate in two observations and an interview, using online programs such as GoReact and WebEx with the student researcher. Detailed instructions will be provided to assist you in using these platforms. The first observation will take place where you engage in inclusive teaching and will conducted before the interview. The second observation will take place after the interview. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted in a setting that suits your comfort and convenience. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. The second observation will be scheduled at the end of the interview. In all, your time in the study will be about 2 hours.

What will the study measure?
The information to be measured will be:
- the types of responsibilities in which they engage and the daily amount of time special education teachers use to complete their responsibilities and
- variations in the use of evidence-based strategies and the decision process to determine the use of specific evidence-based strategies.
- the level of consistency in adhering and aligning to district guidelines

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are no foreseen risks to you while participating in this study beyond the loss of time. If at any time you feel the need to withdraw from the study, you have the right to do so without any risk.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There are no anticipated direct benefits, however as a participant you may gain the satisfaction of sharing your experience to improve school systems and procedures. You may also feel a deeper sense of worth as you reflect on the responsibilities and impact of your duties on the students you serve. Findings will have the potential to improve instructional practices and inform decision makers how to more efficiently structure the workforce. Findings may also be used to assist local government agencies and accreditation organization in making informed decisions.
Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no monetary costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The principal investigator and the student researcher will have access to the data collected for this study. Demographic information will be collected after agreement is indicated. Demographic information to be recorded will include gender, age, race, level of education attainment, and years of experience in education. All survey and interview data will be de-identified.

All coding and analysis will be stored on a password protected folder and, on a password protected computer. All consent forms will be kept in a locked drawer in the Special Education Department at Western Michigan University. The data obtained will be kept for at least three years after the completion of this study and will be stored in a password-protected computer folder, on a password-protected computer after the completion of the study. The student researcher will create backup copies of computer files on an external hard drive, stored in a locked drawer in the Special Education Department at Western Michigan University.

What will happen to my information collected for this research after the study is over?
After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.
Where will this study take place?
Observations of teachers will be conducted while teaching virtually through a remote platform such as GoReact. Interviews will be conducted online at a time and place that is convenient to you.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Each observation will be 30 minutes in length. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. In addition, you will need to factor in the length of time it takes for you to review the transcript of your interview should you choose to participate in validating what was interpreted.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
After agreement is indicated, you will be asked to participate in two observations and an interview, using online program such as GoReact and WebEx with the student researcher. Detailed instructions will be provided to assist you in using these platforms. The first observation will take place where you engage in inclusive teaching and will conducted before the interview. The second observation will take place after the interview. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted in a setting that suits your comfort and convenience. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. The second observation will be scheduled at the end of the interview. In all, your time in the study will be about 2 hours.

What will the study measure?
The information to be measured will be:
- the types of responsibilities in which they engage and the daily amount of time special education teachers use to complete their responsibilities and
- variations in the use of evidence-based strategies and the decision process to determine
  the use of specific evidence-based strategies.
- the level of consistency in adhering and aligning to district guidelines

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are no foreseen risks to you while participating in this study beyond the loss of time. If at any time you feel the need to withdraw from the study, you have the right to do so without any risk.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There are no anticipated direct benefits, however as a participant you may gain the satisfaction of sharing your experience to improve school systems and procedures. You may also feel a deeper
sense of worth as you reflect on the responsibilities and impact of your duties on the students you
serve. Findings will have the potential to improve instructional practices and inform decision
makers how to more efficiently structure the workforce. Findings may also be used to assist local
government agencies and accreditation organization in making informed decisions.
Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the student investigator, Evelyn Phillips at 269-290-4416 or evelyn.c.phillips@wmich.edu or the principal investigator, Elizabeth Whitten, at 269-760-6801 or Elizabeth.whitten@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Please Sign Your Name Date
Appendix B

Special Education Director Email
Dear Dr. [name of Director],

My name is Evelyn Phillips and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. As a doctoral graduate assistant, I supervised several Special Education practicums in your district. My recent supervisory roles were as coordinator for the WMU SPED 3310 Practicum and SPED 4810 Strategic Intervention Field Experience with High Incidence Learners.

To continue my interest in teacher preparation and effectiveness in the classroom, I would like to invite secondary level special education teachers to participate in a research project and request a list of secondary special education teachers in your district who meet the following criteria:

1. High school special education teacher
2. Cotaught for 3 years or more
3. Work in the inclusive setting
4. Recommended by Special Education Director/Supervisor to participant in study based on their coteaching experience in inclusive setting

This research is centered around identifying types of strategies special education teachers use to support students in inclusive settings and how special education teachers use their time. The study will explore what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function while in the inclusive setting.

In light of the changing situation due to the Coronavirus/COVID-19, remote learning is becoming an integral part of educating students. I believe it is vital that teachers share their knowledge and skills. By providing the opportunity to participate in this study, their
contributions may help to develop and improve practices in both the physical and virtual classroom.

With your approval, I will send an email to inform teachers of the details of the research study. Teachers choosing to participate will be sent a copy of the informed consent document. Teachers will be asked to participate in two observations and a face-to-face interview, either in person or through an online program such as Facetime or WebEx with the student researcher. The observations will take place where inclusive teaching takes place. The interview will be scheduled at the teacher’s convenience and conducted in a setting that is suitable to their comfort and convenience. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. You may obtain a copy of the observation protocol and interview questions by request.

I would like to thank you in advance for supporting this research. If you have any questions please contact Evelyn Phillips at evelyn.c.phillips@wmich.edu or (269) 290-4416, or Elizabeth Whitten at Elizabeth.whitten@wmich.edu or (269) 760-6801.

Thank you,

Evelyn Phillips, MA
Doctoral Student of Special Education
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008
Appendix C

Special Education Teacher Email
Hello [Name of teacher]

My name is Evelyn Phillips and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University working on my dissertation in Special Education.

I would like to ask for your help in completing my research project. Broadly speaking, the study will be centered around identifying types of strategies special education teachers use to support students in inclusive settings and how special education teachers use their time. The study will explore what meaning special education teachers ascribe to the role in which they function while in the inclusive setting. By participating, your contribution will help add to the body of knowledge and provide insight into further developing and improving practices in both the physical and virtual inclusive classroom setting. I hope you will find satisfaction sharing your experiences to improve school systems as a testimony to the positive impact of your service to special needs students.

If you are willing to participate, you will complete an informed consent form and return to the address provided. Two observations will be conducted before and after an interview to develop a rich understanding of how you as a special education teacher make meaning of your time. These observations will take place where you are engaged in inclusive practices.

The interview will expand on the observation to allow for a deeper understanding your experience. A copy of interview questions will be emailed to you before it takes place and a copy of the transcript will be sent to you for your verification. The interview will take about an hour and will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted in a setting that suits you through Facetime or Webex. At any time you may withdraw from the study.
After information that could identify you has been removed from the survey and interview, de-identified information for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

Please help me with the next step, indicating your level of interest by underlining or highlighting the corresponding sentence below and returning your response to evelyn.c.phillips@wmich.edu:

- I am interested in learning more about participating in this study or
- I am not interested in participating in this research study.

Upon your interest in learning more, I will send you a copy of the informed consent document and contact you to schedule a date for the first observation.

I truly hope you can help me increase the body of knowledge of our profession.

Sincerely

Evelyn Phillips, MA
Doctoral Student of Special Education
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008
260-290-4416
Appendix D

Observation Invitation Letter to Teacher
As an important step in my study, I would be grateful for the chance to conduct an observation of your time in the inclusive setting. The observation is connected to my dissertation research study titled **Understanding the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher’s life in the inclusive settings**. Observation of your lived experience with inclusive practices will help me develop insights that will be added to the data from your interview and further strengthen the study findings. This will help ensure the accuracy of the interview outcomes as well. I am seeking your agreement to come and observe you during co-teaching. The observation will require only time period.

Thank you so much for your time.

Contents of second email reminder:

I am confirming the date of our second observation during a time when you are engaged in a form of inclusive teaching on ________________

I want to thank you again for your participation in the observation process. The quality of your responses has helped me to identify themes which have added great value to the study. I look forward to sharing the study results with you after my defense in ....
Appendix E

Sample Observation Checklist
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Component</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coteaching Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- identifying and prioritizing long and short-term goals;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- designing instruction toward specific learning goals;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- adapting curriculum tasks and materials;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- teaching learning and engagement strategies; using assistive and instructional technologies;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- providing feedback to guide students' learning and behavior</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grading/correcting student work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional Routines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- providing structure to time and interaction and let students know what to expect in terms of participation and classroom expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual preparation of lessons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting with colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Joint Assessing individual student strength/skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Assessment and progress monitoring</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Counseling/mentoring/ supervising student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementing prevention and intervention strategies for Social/Emotional/Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>- establishing a consistent organized, and respectful learning environment;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- teaching social behaviors;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- conducting functional behavioral</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment to develop individual student behavior plans</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- collaborating with professionals to increase student success;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- organizing and facilitating effective meetings;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- collaborating with families to support student learning and secure needed services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- writing the IEP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School Management activities – SIP/PLCs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional development activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with parents/teachers/students other than IEP prep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Design for Learning/Differentiation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- (providing multiple means of representation, engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

192
and expression to break down
barriers to learning and
provide access to the
curriculum based on
culturally relevant practices)

| Map of Location |  |  |
Appendix F

Interview Protocol
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. My name is Evelyn Phillips and my project seeks to determine how special education teachers spend their professional time on a daily basis. The intent is to provide the opportunity for you to identify what you do and the reasons behind your decisions.

As a special education inclusion teacher, I worked in an urban school district for several years, teaching middle school students identified with learning disabilities. I understand the challenges of providing an environment that is conducive to learning while addressing the many needs of a diverse group of students. I would like to hear your story so that a clear picture can be made of how you meet the demands of the job. The results of the interview will add to the survey data to provide a rich description of your role, responsibilities, and rationale for the way your time is spent.

As we go through the questions, please remember, there are no wrong answers. I am interested in your story and your experience as a special education teacher interacting with the inclusive environment. Before we begin, I would like to make you aware that whatever is discussed today will be recorded and transcribed for data collection and analysis. Students and teachers will be de-identified should their names be mentioned. I would also like to let you know that you may sign the informed consent if you have not already done so. This is to assure you that you are not bound to this project and may end your participation at any time. Additionally, it informs you that once data analysis this takes place, recordings will be destroyed. Findings will be documented and become the property of Western Michigan University. Your name will never appear with your answers as all responses are confidential.
Appendix G

Interview Questions
Study: Understanding the unique role of special education teachers and the essence of the special education teacher’s life in the inclusive setting

Time of Interview: 

Date of Interview: 

Location of Interview: 

Interviewer: Evelyn Phillips

Interviewee: 

1. Please share a little about the path that has led you to this point in your career

   a. What is your experience teaching a student who has been identified with a specific learning disability?
b. How have you built on your training to become more effective when working with students in an inclusive classroom setting?

2. How would you describe your role as a special education teacher in your current capacity?

3. The way of educating students has drastically changed in recent weeks. How have you managed to meet the requirements of your job as a special education teacher in light of Covid 19?
   a. What behaviors/attitudes have been key to achieving your daily goals?
   b. What has been provided from your administrative staff that has been most helpful?
   c. What suggestions do you have to make teaching online special education more effective?

When in the classroom:

4. What do you find works best when working in an inclusive setting?

   a. Universal Design for Learning
   b. Explicit instruction
      i. Instructional routines
      ii. other

198
c. Co-teaching methods
   i. Complementary teaching
   ii. Parallel teaching
   iii. Station teaching
   iv. Alternate teaching
   v. Shared/Team teaching

d. High Leverage Practices (provide a summary sheet of the 22 practices)
   i. Collaboration
   ii. Assessment
   iii. Instruction
   iv. Social/emotional/ behavior focus

e. Cooperative Learning Groups

f. Other(s)

5. What is your reasoning behind the previous response?

6. What do you think students benefit the most from by receiving their instruction in an inclusive setting?

7. What kind of building and classroom culture is needed to facilitate inclusion?
8. How do you establish a working relationship with the teacher(s) to facilitate a classroom climate that is conducive to inclusive learning?

9. How do your services differ from that of the general education teacher?

10. In what ways have you adjusted your teaching to meet the requirements of RTI and MTSS while continuing to provide services to students on your caseload?

11. How do you make the decision to commit to certain responsibilities at the expense of others?

12. What are some of the difficult situations you find yourself in when working in an inclusive setting?
   a. Which situation is the most frustrating to work through?
   b. What are the biggest road-blocks in your day to achieving your daily tasks?

13. Describe a situation where it was necessary for you to advocate for a student on your caseload.
   a. What were the circumstances?
   b. How was the situation resolved?
14. How important is it that your students achieve equal to or better than average grades on their
   a. grade level assignments?
   b. District assessments?
   c. State assessments?

15. What do you find yourself doing that you feel is of little value to the overall well-being
   a. of your students?
   b. of you?

16. What do you find yourself doing that you wish you could do more of? Why?

17. How do you see special education evolving in the next five years?

18. If you could influence the course of special education, what policy would you introduce/eliminate?

19. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Prompts for clarifying information - How do you know that…Can you provide an example…
What do you mean by the term…
Appendix H

Data Trustworthiness Letter
I want to thank you again for participating in my interview and observation process. The quality of your responses allowed me to identify emerging themes and add great value to my study. It’s been quite a while, but as promised, I have included a copy of your transcriptions and an accompanying document highlighting the themes so far. The documents are quite lengthy so if you are short on time, I recommend reading the *P5 Analysis (Process Codes)* first.

As an important voice in my study, I want to give you the opportunity to examine your interview transcriptions and review the major and common themes. This will help ensure that the study outcomes are as accurate as possible.

I’d be grateful if you would look over these as soon as you can so that I may continue with the data analysis. Should you wish to add to or change any of your responses, please do using a different text color. **If you are happy with what is written, just email me back with “APPROVED.”**

Once again, I appreciate your time. Thank you! I look forward to sharing the study results with you after my defense.

Kind regards,
Appendix I

Coding of Phenomenology Study
Essence of the lived experience of the special education teacher in the inclusive setting

- Personal Bracketing
- Significant Statements
- Meaning Units
- Textual Description
- Structural Description
Appendix J

Sample of Analytical Memoing
207

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Interview</th>
<th>2nd Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gerund/pro cess coding/ from Interview</strong></td>
<td><strong>In vivo Coding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 was conducted during the heart of the pandemic - dates and had just implemented a hybrid schedule</td>
<td>Student interruptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First interview was Dec 7 Second Interview Dec 26</td>
<td>P3 district voted to go back to school 3 days a week, starting Jun 25 (Mon, Tues, Thurs) First Observation was Jun 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First interview was Feb 3 Second Observation Feb 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inclusion is a mindset and not a place based on his activities and his intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Memo</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student interruptions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 was conducted two months later during the period where many districts were moving into the final phase of return to learn</td>
<td>First Observation First interview was Feb 19 Second Observation Second interview Mar 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Describing their role**

I have worked tirelessly to bridge that gap and to say nope, they’re all of our kids. They’re all Gen Ed kids first, I’m just here to help you help the kids you know. 76

So we kind of bring that discussion, you guys, it’s our goal, you know. We work together, the general education teachers, and the special education teachers. I think that’s what the accommodation is all about. 83

And it doesn’t stop with a one-time conversation. It’s an ongoing open-door level of:

Knowing students

I really, as a special education teacher, always try to get to know my students. I’ll look up all their accommodations and make a list and keep it on the room of all their accommodations and then of course really tried to always extend those accommodations when appropriate. But I also don’t limit it to the students who qualify with special education. 60

**Does the ability to teach set speed teachers apart?**

I wouldn’t say that it’s specifically a special education teacher thing. I mean I know that the general education teachers and I work with, we can change roles interchangeably. Like they think just building those relationships. I think I can read all the books in the world but it boils down to relationship with kids. You can have all the research-based strategies you want but if that kid doesn’t want you, they’re not going to do it. So, just building those relationships, coming to work everyday and really knowing that they're going to have a reliable teacher that's going to be there for them, check their grades, hold them accountable - that kind of stuff. It's a different realm. 67

Math specific. Like if a student needs that, like I said, the pull-out math class is really decontextualized. So like

Well I think my role is more of a consultant to those Co teachers, I would say, because I’m not directly in any Gen Ed classes with my kids. 79

I’m the Ed teacher

I have a couple of resource room classes that are in the day where I take a lot of those Gen Ed kids. It’s because, it’s just there’s nowhere for them to go. And then I also teach a transition skills class. A transition math class and we work on really getting in here. And then I do my inclusion staff two or three a day in Math and Science. 90

As I was respondent 143

So I find myself being very flexible, it’s my job to be the flexible one. 183

That’s my expertise - it’s knowing what kind of groups to pull and knowing how to differentiate. 332
Appendix K

Process and Color Coding With Analytical Memoing
Process Codes (17 March 2021):

1. Describing their role
2. Identifying a feeling to your role
3. Being counter productive
4. Stating expectations of general education/teacher/environment for success of inclusion
5. Establishing working relationship with gen ed teachers
6. Delineating between gen ed and sped roles
7. (Working through) challenges with gen ed teachers
8. Implementing inclusion – Teaching and learning strategies
9. Establishing relationships with gen ed students
10. Implementing inclusion – specific coteaching models
11. Implementing inclusion – teacher behavior
12. Planning
13. Assessing students
14. Achieving positive outcomes for students
15. Identifying Challenges with different plan times/ not meeting in some way to plan
16. Identifying Challenges in scheduling
17. Identifying challenges with time
18. Identifying challenges curriculum content
19. Receiving administrative support
20. Wishing for more time to do...
21. Identifying/Defining inclusion
22. Benefiting from inclusion
23. Meeting the requirements of the job during the COVID-19 pandemic
24. Adjusting attitude to deal with COVID-19 while doing your job
25. Adjusting teaching (goal(s)) during virtual learning/COVID
26. Addressing student challenges during COVID-19
27. Learning while doing
28. Thinking toward the future
29. Hearing results, evaluate, adjust
30. Total life challenges – adjusted to goals

209
Appendix L

Sample of Process Coding With In Vivo Statement/Significant Statements
Appendix M

Second Coding Leading to Themes
1. Role
   a. Describing their role
   b. Identifying a feeling to your role
   c. Delineating between gen ed and sped roles

2. Inclusion
   a. Identifying/Defining inclusion
   b. Students’ outcomes

3. Students
   a. Assessing students
   b. Achieving positive outcomes for students

4. Relationships
   a. Establishing working relationship with gen ed teachers
   b. Establishing relationships with gen ed students

5. COVID-19 Pandemic
   a. Meeting the requirements of the job during the COVID-19 pandemic
   b. Adjusting attitude to deal with COVID-19 while doing your job
   c. Addressing student challenges during COVID-19

6. Being counter productive
   a. Meeting the requirements of the job during the COVID-19 pandemic
   b. Adjusting attitude to deal with COVID-19 while doing your job
   c. Addressing student challenges during COVID-19

7. Receiving administrative support (go back to the data)
Appendix N

Major Themes and Research Questions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective Coding/Major Theme</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>RQ 1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities and duties</td>
<td>RQ 1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>RQ 1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>RQ 2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>RQ 2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive practices</td>
<td>RQ3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in a suburban school?</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>RQ4. As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their <em>value added</em>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19 Pandemic</td>
<td>RQ5. What is the experience of high school inclusion special education teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?</td>
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</table>
Appendix O

Thematic Portrayal of the Experiences of Special Education High School Inclusion Teachers Linked to Research Questions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
<th>Thematic Portrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
<td>Share knowledge with teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ 1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
<td>Know students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teach students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocate for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide academic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Gen ed teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocate for students</td>
</tr>
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<td>IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsibilities and duties</strong></td>
<td>Data collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
<td>Small group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accommodating and modifying assignments</td>
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<td>Coteaching</td>
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<td>Academic support</td>
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<td>IEP caseload management</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td>Verifying student accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
<td>Assessing student learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Connecting with general education teachers</td>
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<td>Making accommodations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maximizing time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitating the appropriate learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Challenges</td>
<td>environment to prepare students for success postsecondary life. Developing independent learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Challenges</td>
<td>IEP – getting students to advocate for themselves Students not attending school Rigid curriculum (CCSS) Providing early intervention to keep students up with the content/pace Spending Quality time with caseload students Providing structure Implementing interventions with fidelity Dedicated instructional time A way to confirm gen ed teachers are giving quality attention to students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Consideration for gen ed teachers Teaching teachers to skillfully understand IEP Trust Mutual respect Open communication Support Allow freedom to use initiative Communicating philosophies of teaching and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>RQ2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level</td>
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219
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level</td>
<td>Implementing IEP components with fidelity Disciplined and management disagreements Working with a wide age range of teachers Gen ed teacher interference with sped teacher implementing IEP accommodations. Gen ed teachers restricting peer to peer interaction Lack of consistency in pairing co-teachers to develop working relationships and content knowledge Avoiding ‘tracking’ as a convenience when scheduling Lack of congruency/equity in PD opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Universal design for learning LRE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level in a suburban school?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration and diverse community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn from peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion as a mindset</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behave to build relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking in on students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in the content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep lessons simple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine and Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed grouping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing Gen ed teachers with supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing emotional support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide academic support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Specific training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful grouping</td>
<td>IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer to peer learning</td>
<td>Expertise in area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine and Structure (Systems and procedures)</td>
<td>Reduction in staffing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>COVID -19 Pandemic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ4.** As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their *value added*?

**COVID -19 Pandemic**

**RQ5.** What is the experience of high school inclusion special education teachers as they adjust their practices to respond to the impact of a global pandemic?

- Reduction in staffing
- Larger classes
- Collaborating and communicating to provide student instruction.
- Planning during online seat work.
- Alternative assignments (UDL).
- Create ways to motivate kids while online.
- Advocate for student to come in during remote learning.
- Easier access to parents develops ‘seamless’ flow of dialog for positive and negative
conversation.

Easy access to student schedules.

Diverse ways of providing assignments.

3 hours working with students 3 hours paper work (monotonous) 1 hour personal maintenance.

Appreciation for additional responsibilities.

After school workout to relax.

Lack of communication over schedules

Social distancing affects proximity and use of strategies.

Teaching steps to use technology efficiently.

Strategic planning to bring in students with learning disabilities and at risk for intervention during hybrid phase.

Social distancing constraints on instruction and student engagement.

Additional paperwork.

Overabundance of online teaching resources.

Change in RTI schedule.

Changes in organization/structure of classes

Fully remote – attempting to keep things as usual as possible but no movement, no
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>physically checking for completion, materials, focus (need for structure).</td>
<td>Increasing parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative assignments need to be communicated every trimester to a new group of teachers.</td>
<td>Flexibility of Google classroom to assist teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need to motivate students.</td>
<td>Giving more individual attention to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting RTI scheduling.</td>
<td>Increasing connection with parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to practice social skills (target skills).</td>
<td>Google classroom assisting teachers with their responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient mindset.</td>
<td>Online learning providing less distraction for student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laid back mindset.</td>
<td>Reducing behavior issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustable mindset. (relational)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advantages

| Increasing parental involvement |
| Flexibility of Google classroom to assist teachers. |
| Giving more individual attention to students. |
| Increasing connection with parents. |
| Google classroom assisting teachers with their responsibilities. |
| Online learning providing less distraction for student learning. |
| Reducing behavior issues. |
| Student | Not attending classes.  
|         | Lack of student motivation.  
|         | Students’ lack of engagement online.  
|         | Emotional health of students while at home.  
|         | Academic failure.  
|         | Lack of human touch/connectivity-   
|         | “forgotten” part of the job – “*somebody* out there” – real and in person.  
|         | Inadequate home conditions for remote learning.  
|         | Surreptitious online learner behavior (cheating).  
|         | Loss of opportunities to learn the ‘hidden curriculum’.  
|         | Plethora of choice to remain virtual and not attend in person.  
|         | Multiple means of communicating |
Appendix P
Final Analysis Chart 30 April 2021
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do secondary special education teachers use their time to respond to the demands of their job?</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Managing workload, Provide socioemotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do special education teachers describe their interactions with general education teachers in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at the secondary level?</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Coteaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Communication and Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What practices work best in an inclusive setting to facilitate learning at</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Learning environment, Provide socioemotional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the secondary level in a suburban school? | support
---|---

| Differentiated support
---|---

| Instructional strategies
---|---

| Students | focused intervention time
---|---

| Role | IEP knowledge and requirements
---|---

4. As special education teachers work in the inclusive setting what do they do that cannot be carried out by general education teachers? What is their *value added*?

5. How do special education teachers respond to the Pandemic Learning Milieu? IEP Goals –
education teachers adjust their practices in response to a global pandemic? (respond to the impact of a global pandemic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student challenges/social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Disposition/attitude to role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Parent involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Q

Contents of Michigan Safe Schools Road Map Document
No schools were in phase 5 of the plan

State – Michigan Safe Schools Road Map June 30 2020 Governor Gretchen Whitmer


Phase 1-3 No in-person instruction, remote only

Strongly recommended – mental and socio-emotional health - which dove tails into what participants shared:
Provide all staff with timely, responsive, and ongoing training/professional development as well as needed tools, resources, and implementation support, focused on a variety of topics, including: social-emotional learning, trauma-informed best practices, identification of students at risk, proper local referral protocols, and self-care to promote holistic wellness and resilience and to prevent burnout and vicarious trauma.

Compile and regularly update comprehensive lists of wellness resources available to both staff and students that can be provided in conjunction with screening activities, and that reference school and community wellness resources.

Establish ongoing reporting protocols for school staff to evaluate physical and mental health status. a Provide resources for staff self-care, including resiliency strategies

Communicate with parents and guardians, via a variety of channels, return to school transition information

Remote Instruction

Review students’ IEPs, IFSPs, and 504 plans in coordination with general and special education teachers to reflect the child’s needs based on assessment data and parent feedback, and design accommodations and match services accordingly.

Commence online intervention and support services. Plans must include all programs and learning environments especially special education…
Establish structures for general and special education teachers to collaborate on delivery methods for assessments and instruction as outlined in IEPs. Consider students’ needs around accessibility and provide assistive technologies, where possible

Secure supports for students who are transitioning to postsecondary.

Conduct checkpoints with school leaders around curriculum and instruction and ongoing monitoring of student progress, specifically honing in on the progress of students in need of additional support

Develop a continuation of services plan for students needing occupational, physical, and/or speech and language therapy, including evaluations by school psychologists and social workers.
Strongly Recommended While Schools Are Closed for In-Person Instruction

Governance

1. Create a district return-to-instruction and learning Whenever group meeting led by the director of curriculum, chief
academics, officer or equivalent, and composed of a
broad group of stakeholders on the district and school
levels.
   - Gather feedback from families, teachers, students,
   - and school leaders about their experiences with
   virtual learning and remote learning.
   - Share the district’s remote learning plan with all
   involved stakeholders.

Remote Instruction

- Ensure that remote learning plans, revised based on
  feedback and input from school leaders, educators,
  families, and students, are distributed to all involved
  stakeholders in the target language. Ensure opportunities
  for ongoing feedback.
- Ensure remote learning programs are taught to deliver
  academic content and high-quality instructional
  modifications, integrated within a quality digital
  environment and best practices that promote student
  engagement, consistency, and differentiation. Consult MDE
  for high-quality digital resources.
- Support schools in assessing every student’s grades and
  learning.
  1) During the first few weeks of school, using a common
  assessment tool or tool, examine prior knowledge
  and performance assessments that can be given
  online or conducted virtually. To understand where
  students are academically in various instructional
  areas for teachers, students, or families.
- Review students’ IEPs, 504s, and 504 plans in coordination
  with general and special education teachers to
  reflect the child’s needs based on assessment data,
  parent feedback, and any accommodations
  and services.
- Consider online intervention and support services. Plans
  must include all programs and learning environments,
  especially special education, birth to five services,
  and career and technical education.
- Establish structures for general and special
  education teachers to collaborate on delivery
  methods for assessment and feedback as
  outlined in BPA. Consider students’ needs
  around accessibility and provide adaptive
  technologies, where possible.
- Secure support for students who are transitioning to
  postsecondary.
- Conduct check-ins with school leaders around
  curriculum and instruction and ongoing monitoring
  of student progress, specifically focusing on joint
  progress of students in need of additional support.
- Remain connected with MDE about policies and
  guidance.
- Develop a combination of services plans for students
  needing occupational, physical, and speech and
  language therapy, including evaluations by school
  psychologists and social workers.
Phase 4 In-Person or Hybrid instruction with required safety protocols

Safety Protocols

Required

Facial coverings must always be worn in hallways and common areas by preK-12 students in the building except for during meals.

Facial coverings must be worn in classrooms by all students grades 6-12.
Provide adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors.

Limit use of classroom materials to small groups and disinfect between use, or provide adequate supplies to assign for individual student use. (this was made reference to by P3 – not able to have students come to the board or participate in group work; also P5 using hand over hand technique.

Strongly Recommended
Space desks six feet apart in classrooms. Class sizes should be kept to the level afforded by necessary spacing requirements.
Floor tape or other markers should be used at sixfoot intervals where line formation is anticipated.
Provide social distancing floor/seating markings in waiting and reception areas. α Post signs on the doors of restrooms to indicate proper social distancing and hand hygiene techniques.

Recommended
If a classroom has windows that can open, they should be open as much as possible, weather permitting. Considerations should be made for students with allergy-induced asthma. α As able and appropriate, schools should try to cohort groups of students to isolated hallways or areas that can be monitored.
Personal Protective Equipment

**REQUIRED**
- Facial coverings must always be worn by staff except for meals. Facial coverings may be homemade or disposable level-one (basic) grade surgical masks. Any staff member who cannot medically tolerate a facial covering must not wear one. Any student who is incapacitated or unable to remove the facial covering without assistance, must not wear a facial covering.
- Preschool and special education teachers should consider wearing clear masks.
- Homemade facial coverings must be washed daily.
- Disposable facial coverings must be disposed of at the end of each day.
- Facial coverings must be worn by preK-12 students, staff, and bus drivers during school transportation. Any staff or student that is unable to medically tolerate a facial covering must not wear one. Any student or staff that is incapacitated or unable to remove the facial covering, must not wear one. Facial coverings may be homemade or disposable level-one (basic) grade surgical masks.
- Facial coverings must always be worn in hallways and common areas by preK-12 students in the building except for during meals. Any student that is unable to medically tolerate a facial covering must not wear one. Any student that is incapacitated or unable to remove the facial covering, must not wear one. Facial coverings may be homemade or disposable level-one (basic) grade surgical masks.
- Homemade facial coverings must be washed daily.
- Disposable facial coverings must be disposed of at the end of each day.
- Non-students with significant disabilities preventing the use of facial coverings are referred to forthcoming guidance from MSE.
- Facial coverings must be worn in classrooms by all students grades 6-12. Any student who cannot medically tolerate a facial covering must not wear one. Any student who is incapacitated, or unable to remove the facial covering without assistance, must not wear one.
- All students in grades K-5 must wear facial coverings unless students remain with their classes throughout the school day and do not come into close contact with students in another class.

**Strongly Recommended**
- Facial coverings should be considered for K-5 students and students with special needs in classrooms.
- Facial coverings should be considered for preK students and students with special needs in hallways and common areas.
- Facial coverings are not recommended for use in classrooms by children ages 3 and 4.
- Facial coverings should never be used on children under age 2.

Hygiene

**REQUIRED**
- Provide adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors (including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol for safe use by staff and students, paper towels, tissues, and signs reinforcing proper handwashing techniques).
- Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and/or the safe use of hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

**Strongly Recommended**
- Educate staff and students on how to cough and sneeze into their elbows, or to cover with a tissue. Used tissues should be thrown in the trash and hands washed immediately using proper hand hygiene techniques.
Instruction at Phase 4

Strongly recommended

Make expectations clear to school leaders and teachers around hybrid or remote instruction that include: a Best practices for blended or remote learning; Grade-level proficiencies; Modes of
student assessment and feedback; Differentiated support for students; The inclusion of social-emotional learning; among other guidelines

Set an instructional vision that ensures that: Every student will start the year with access to grade-level instruction and high quality, standards-aligned instructional materials in every subject.

Every student will be assessed on their understanding of prerequisite skills and grade-level proficiencies using formative assessments, screeners, or diagnostics.

Every students’ academic and socialemotional needs will be addressed with the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and strengthening connections with students

Secure supports for students who are transitioning to postsecondary.

Support schools to implement grade-level curricula that is aligned to Michigan preK-12 standards

Revise students’ IEPs, IFSPs, and 504 plans in coordination with general and special education teachers to reflect the child’s evolving needs based on assessment data and parent feedback, and design accommodations and match services accordingly

(What does MARSE say here?)

Establish structures for general and special education teachers to collaborate on delivery methods for assessments and instruction as outlined in IEPs. Consider students’ needs around accessibility
and provide assistive technologies, where possible. (Participants shared if and how they were able to plan and assess with coteachers.)

Develop a continuation of services plan for students needing either occupational, physical, and/or speech and language therapy, including evaluations by school psychologists and social workers.

Implement any additional communication systems needed to reach every family and student in their home language through multiple modes (e.g., text, all call, email, home visit) to share (P1 and 2, 4 talked about ways in which they contacted students and parents at the teacher level). Provide adequate time for schools and educators to engage [professional learning communities]

Conduct a review of each students’ IEP in partnership with teachers and parents to reflect each student’s evolving needs based on time away from associated services including OT, PT, and Speech while school buildings were closed.

Procure any additional standards-aligned tools or materials to support differentiation, intervention, and remote learning, based on students’ needs.

Set expectations for schools and teachers to integrate high quality digital tools and resources that are appropriate and sustainable at each grade level, to increase teachers’ and students’ familiarity with online learning in case of a return to remote instruction.
Determine and activate structures outside of the regular school day, such as summer learning options, extended day, and after-school programming, to potentially be leveraged to support students in need of additional support. (P3 and P4 talked about afterschool RTI and Outreach program)

If hybrid, activate plans to monitor and assess the following: Connectivity and Access: Ensure that all students and families have adequate connectivity and the devices necessary to successfully engage in and complete schoolwork. (P1, P2, talked about the difficulties students experienced with connectivity. P4 shared how one student had assignment requirements modified because of no access)

Attendance: Develop systems to monitor and track students’ online attendance on a daily basis. (Participant bemoan the fact that this was a requirement although they understood why)

Student Work: Teachers will assess the quality of student work and provide feedback to students and families. Students will self-assess the quality of work, reflect on teacher feedback, and learning progress. (P1 talked about the Check sheet, P2 talked about the check sheet, P3 talked out Ticket out the door, P4 talked about Accountability sheet, P5 used graphic organizer for tests [what did she call this?]
Strongly Recommended Before Schools Reopen for In-Person or Hybrid Instruction

Governance
- Create a district Return to Instruction and Learning steering group, potentially led by the Director of Curriculum, Chief Academic Officer or the equivalent, and comprised of a broad group of stakeholders on the district and school level, to:
  - Gather feedback from families, teachers, students, and school leaders about their experiences with remote learning through online surveys and virtual focus groups or conversations.
  - Revise the district's remote learning plan to incorporate feedback and input from stakeholders to improve its effectiveness.
  - Share the district's remote learning plan with all involved stakeholders in case of a return to remote learning.

Instruction
- Activate hybrid learning programs at scale to deliver standards-aligned curricula and high-quality instructional materials. Integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning and best practices that promote student engagement, consistency, and differentiation. Consult MDE for high-quality digital resources.
- Make expectations clear to school leaders and teachers around hybrid or remote instruction that include:
  - Best practices for blended or remote learning.
  - Grade-level proficiency;
  - Models of student assessment and feedback;
  - Differentiated support for students;
  - The inclusion of social-emotional learning; and
  - Guidance around daily instructional time and workload per different grade bands to ensure consistency for students.
- Set an instructional vision that ensures that:
  - Every student will start the year with access to grade-level instruction and high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials in every subject.
  - Every student will be assessed on their understanding of prerequisite skills and grade-level proficiency using formative assessments, summatives, or diagnostics.
  - Every student’s academic and social-emotional needs will be addressed with the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and strengthening connections with students.
  - Secure supports for students who are transitioning to postsecondary.
  - Support schools to implement grade-level curricula that is aligned to Michigan preK-12 standards.
  - Support teachers to utilize rigorous standards that identify the major work of the grade in order to focus, prioritize, and accelerate instruction.
  - Revise students’ IEP, ISEP, and 504 plans in coordination with general and special education teachers to reflect the child’s evolving needs based on assessment data and parent feedback, and design accommodations and modifications.
- Communicate intervention and support services. Plans must include all programs.
and learning environments, especially special education, birth to five services, and CTE.

- Establish structures for general and special education teachers to collaborate on delivery methods for assessments and instruction as outlined in IEPs. Consider students' needs around accessibility and provide assistive technologies, where possible.

- Inventory all intervention programs and services available to students on the district and school level and identify any gaps.

- Remain connected with MOC about policies and guidance.

- Develop a continuation of services plans for students needing either occupational, physical, and/or speech and language therapy, including evaluations by school psychologists and social workers.

Communications and Family Supports

- Implement any additional communication systems needed to reach every family and student in their home language through multiple modes (e.g., text, call, email, home visit) to share:
  - Expectations around their child's return to school.
  - Clear information about schedules and configurations, (Hybrid).
  - Information about modes of assessment, details on curricula used in each of the core subjects, and grade-level proficiency, and
  - Plans for each of the different school opening scenarios.

- Provide resources that demonstrate schools value parents as partners in their child's education. Offer family supports that provide families with:
  - Training about how to access and use the school's chosen digital systems and tools;
  - Supports and resources for families to use at home, such as grade-specific activities and strategies for teaching and helping their child;
  - Opportunities to build their digital literacy, and
  - Strategies to support their child's learning at home.

Professional Learning

- Provide adequate time for schools and educators to engage in:
  - Intentional curriculum planning and documentation to ensure stability of instruction, whether school buildings are open or closed;
  - Identify students who did not engage in remote learning and develop a plan to provide additional support, if needed. Share data and concerns about each student's growth and needs with students' assigned teacher(s) for the 2022-2023 school year;
  - Identify students who potentially need additional support, and
  - Share knowledge and ideas around the use and effectiveness of digital tools and resources that support remote learning.

- Create a plan for professional learning and training, with goals to:
  - Offer restorative supports for teachers and learning around equity and implicit bias,
Appendix R

Conceptual Framework
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Understanding the Unique Role of the Special Education Teacher and the Essence of the Special Education Teacher's Life in the Inclusive Setting

High school Special education teacher

Interaction

High School general education curriculum and teachers

Students

Essence of experience in facilitating inclusion

Strategies