

CONSTRUCTING THE ROLE OF THE SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATOR

A Dissertation  
by  
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Submitted to the Graduate School  
Appalachian State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2018  
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program  
Reich College of Education

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## **Abstract**

### CONSTRUCTING THE ROLE OF THE SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATOR

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The purpose of this research is to understand the perceived roles of secondary special educators, how they developed their role perceptions, and how their role perceptions determine their job functions. This study examines how secondary special educators, who primarily serve students with high incidence or mild disabilities, perceive their professional role across six public high schools in a southeastern state. Individual perspectives regarding their professional duties, job descriptions, schedules, and other artifacts were reviewed to examine how this group of teachers constructed their professional roles.

The theoretical framework guiding this research is social constructionism. Exploring the influence of the social dynamics within the educational institution and the impact of these dynamic on how this group of teachers defined and performed their professional work was paramount to this study.

A qualitative multiple case study approach was used to explore the meaning secondary special educators serving students with high incidence disabilities in public

schools in three geographic areas of one state in the southeastern part of the United States, placed on their roles and ensuing work. These cases were bounded by similar work assignments, time, and governing policies within one state.

The resulting data suggests these teachers' daily duties may vary, yet they share common role perceptions that manifested in four themes: (1) thinking about inclusion as a service, not a philosophy; (2) recognizing a disconnect between instructional practices and Individual Education Program (IEP) goals; (3) performing the job as if they are a "Jack of all trades, but master of none"; and (4) feeling subordinate to general education colleagues. Several implications for practice were identified.

## **Acknowledgments**

This study and the inspiration behind it comes from the many selfless, devoted, driven, passionate, and under-recognized group of special education providers I have had the honor and privilege to work with over the last 25 years. There are too many to name, but they know who they are. They have inspired me to be a better educator, leader, and person. I hope they will continue to fight the fight everyday for the students who are indeed special and make this world a better place.

I must also acknowledge my family, for without their continued encouragement and support, I would not have stayed the course of this rigorous journey. To my brother John, thank you for all the teasing that paved the path to my pursuit of higher expectations. You were the catalyst that ignited the desire to pursue my doctorate. To my parents Susan and Eddy, you always convinced me that I was stronger and smarter than I felt most of the time. Thank you for believing in me! To Peter, your continued support and assistance with parenting my children while I worked long hours and continually extended myself through higher education, made this venture possible. To Justin and Ian, my two amazing sons, it is because of you both that I strive to be a better educator and person. Thank you for understanding when mom had projects due or needed to study.

Next, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Roma Angel, Dr. Jennifer McGee, and Dr. Rose Matuszny. This was the best dissertation committee a student could have. You all gave so much of yourselves to provide me honest and meaningful feedback. You pushed and

encouraged me when I needed it most. I have been blessed to have such great mentors and teachers throughout my collegiate experience. Therefore, I must also thank the faculty and staff in the Educational Leadership department for creating a learning environment that inspires so many.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those who assisted in this research. First I must thank the six participants who gave their time and valuable insight. Thank you for trusting in this stranger to share your powerful stories. Your work is touching the lives of so many in your communities; I wish you all the best in the future. Next, I must thank Jodi Buckland, a dedicated colleague who not only believed in my work, but also graciously gave her time to assist me with coding and interpreting my data results. She challenged me to broaden my lens at times, while helping me hone in on some powerful themes. Without the hard work and dedication of all these individuals, this research would have never happened.

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to both of my sons, Ian and Justin. Ian, you have inspired me to improve special education by giving me the student perspective. You have taught me the importance of building on the strengths and unique gifts that all students possess. Justin, you continue to amaze me with your reflective and analytical sense of being. It is your voice I hear when I need to step outside of my own thoughts and look at something from a different point of view.



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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The field of special education is dynamic, rewarding, and challenging. Students with disabilities exhibit diverse strengths, interests, and needs. Designing and implementing effective, engaging, and relevant educational programs that promote student access to and progress in the general curriculum requires a highly skilled educator. However, many public school districts across the nation continue to struggle to find and keep qualified special education teachers (Boe & Cook, 2006). Meeting the diverse academic, functional, behavioral, and social needs of students with disabilities is challenging and requires highly trained and dedicated professionals.

Both special and general education are highly politicized and under national scrutiny regarding the overall academic effectiveness and student outcomes. The challenges of educating youth today have increased, given conflicting political and societal expectations. With regard to special education, the stakes have never been higher. All students with disabilities are now held to the same accountability standards as their non-disabled peers since the onset of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 and the most current reauthorization titled Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. Consequently, school districts must hire, continuously train, support and retain highly qualified special education teachers in an effort to improve academic and functional outcomes of students with disabilities.

Prior to 1975, and the passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, no mandates were in place that required the inclusion of

students with disabilities in the public school setting. Children with disabilities were excluded, and, therefore, special educators were not needed. Once Public Law 94-142 was in place, the need for educators who could specifically work with students with disabilities began. The law called for the inclusion of all students, regardless of their disability and this was to be in the least restrictive environment. It was then that special educators were needed to provide students with disabilities access to public education. The earlier goal of access for students with disabilities was for schools to provide programs and curriculum for students in special education that addressed appropriate adaptive and functional skill sets, as compared to the academically focused curriculum provided to students without disabilities (Osgood, 2008). Over the past 40 years, the role of the special educator has changed, as we more clearly understand the needs and strengths of students with disabilities. Practices and expectations have changed, through the combined efforts of individual advocates and advocacy organizations, and changes to federal and state legislation aimed at improving the academic outcomes for all students. The focus of education now is on increased rigor for all students. No longer is the expectation limited to students with disabilities simply having access to public education, but rather schools are charged with providing all students, regardless of ability, the opportunity for accessible and effective instruction (Friend, 2014). Over the last two decades, research has influenced changes to the special educator role as well as teaching practices and methodology, such as inclusive education, response to intervention, strategy instruction, co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and positive behavioral supports, each of which is a part of the education landscape and each new approach to educating learners challenges our previous

definitions of special education and what it means to be a special educator (Simonsen, Faggella-Luby, Sugai, Rhein, Madaus, & Alfano, 2010).

Over the last 50 years, our United States history and culture continue to change the landscape of special education, which when compared to general education, is a relatively new addition to the field of public education. Federal legislation mandating special education came at a time in our history when there was a heightened focus on civil rights and anti-discrimination (Osgood, 2008). Prior to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), the predecessor to the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the education of students with disabilities was not mandated (Osgood, 2008). Once regulations were in place, the focus was on allowing students with disabilities to attend school. Little focus was put on how inclusive the educational experience was, let alone, whether or not students with exceptionalities would receive a meaningful academic and functional education (Friend, 2014).

At the present time, there continues to be debate within our society regarding what it means to have an appropriate education, especially for students with disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). Our judicial system is often tasked with issuing opinions that strive to interpret policy and practice, making special education a litigious entity. This is a prime example of the influence of historical and cultural factors on meaning making within the field of special education. For example, when viewing special education through a social constructionist framework, one must question how a quality education is defined and what the role of the special educator is in educating students with disabilities.

## **Special Education History**

While there have been several revisions to the original Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation since its inception in 1975, educators continue to experience a shift in philosophies and expectations for the education of students with disabilities. At the onset of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, students with more obvious physical disabilities were the ones most likely to receive special education services. The 1980s saw a rise in psychological research and the demand for better student outcomes for public schools, which changed the landscape for special education. More students were being referred, evaluated, and found eligible for less obvious disabilities associated with learning and executive functioning (Raymond, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), students with disabilities account for approximately 13% of students in the United States who were served in public education during the 2014-2015 school year. In addition, NCES proclaims that over half of students with disabilities attending public schools are those who are identified as having mild disabilities, which are often unrecognizable based on physical appearance alone.

The way in which special educators address the needs of students with milder high incidence disabilities is very different than how they deliver instruction to students with more intensive needs (Raymond, 2017). The eligibility categories most often associated with mild or high incidence disabilities include: Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Speech Language Impairments (SLI), Other Health Impairments (OHI), Emotional Disabilities (ED), Intellectual Disabilities-Mild (IDMI), and some higher functioning forms of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Students with mild or high incidence disabilities

often look and act in similar ways to their non-disabled peers, but their academic, social and/or functional performance in school can be significantly delayed as a result their underlying disability. Typically, students with high incidence disabilities spend the majority of their instructional day in the general education classroom, yet their academic and functional needs are very different from their non-disabled peers (Raymond, 2017). According to Friend (2014), designing highly effective inclusive education, through a sound co-teaching approach, can yield positive outcomes for students with disabilities. However, as Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010) point out, there appears to be a “blurring” of special education between two contrasting ideologies, one which focuses on a more traditional clinical and prescriptive approach often in a separate setting, away from non-disabled peers, and the other which advocates for a more inclusive setting and universally designed instruction with embedded interventions. These conflicting views can lead to role confusion for the special educators tasked with designing and providing quality services to students with disabilities. The diverse philosophies of practitioners in the field, coupled with the demands placed on all educators to improve the rigor of the curriculum and the performance of all students, has presented a difficult challenge to the institution of public education and to the special educator, in particular.

### **Guiding Framework**

The field of education is rich with inquiry and research. The impacts of such research on all stakeholders, society, and the institution, I believe, guide the daily practices that occur in our public schools. According to Burr (2015), social constructionism is a dynamic way of making meaning and building knowledge, influenced by history, cultural, and social interaction. Knowledge and meaning are constructed and are fluid. The



generational traditions lend to meaning making, and as Gergen (2015) suggests, “Constructionists recognize that all traditions of understanding can offer useful insights or forms of practice” (p. 66). This intermingling of ideals, traditions, culture, and global interactions requires constant negotiation among conflicting interests in the process of making meaning. While constructionism embraces such diverse ideals in meaning making, our institution of education must be prepared to embrace post empirical concepts. Challenging absolute truths and encouraging deep dissection of competing ideals should be a guiding tenet of all social organizations or institutions (Morgan, 1997). One would think that of all institutions, education would be more inclined to progressive ideas; yet on closer inspection, we find a system that is rooted in traditional values and often resistant to change (Mitchell, Crowson, & Shipps, 2011). Unfortunately, the continued adherence to traditional values and resistance to change may explain why there appears to be a rise in conflicting and polarizing beliefs about how to best educate students with disabilities, which sparks controversy in the field.

If there are varying ideals as to the purpose of special education, it is no wonder that there is confusion regarding the role of the special education teacher. For example, some administrators expect special educators to focus solely on assisting general education teachers with managing and instructing students with disabilities, while others expect special education teachers to accelerate academic and functional learning, narrowing the achievement gap (Steinbrecher, Fix, Mahal, Serna, & McKeown, 2015). The way in which public school personnel negotiate these conflicting interests sets the stage for current and future understanding and practices. According to Gergen (2015), from the social constructionist framework, research is designed to identify these competing ideals and

make meaning of the impact on the phenomenon being studied. In a quest to understand the perceived roles of special educators serving students with high incidence disabilities at the secondary level, I find social constructionism to provide a lens that will help interpret the multiple emerging meanings and negotiations happening within this controversial field.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for exploring the perceived role of secondary special educators is that based on the Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2016), students with disabilities across this country continue to experience decreased academic and functional performance. Reduced rates of graduation with regular diplomas as compared to their non-disabled peers, regardless of the heightened emphasis on inclusive services and increased expectations to meet the same academic standards as their non-disabled peers continues to be the trend across this nation (US Department of Education, 2016). All public school educators' professional performance is judged and critiqued predominately on student accountability standards and outcomes, and this scrutiny is inclusive of special education teachers. The 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in conjunction with the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and now titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have held public educators to the same standard for educating all students, regardless of whether some students have disabilities that adversely impact their access to and progress in the general curriculum. Many of the compliance standards initially enacted within the NCLB legislation and continued in the ESSA require evidence that is grounded in empirical methodology.

Further research is needed to better understand the importance of accountability indicators for teachers on educating students with disabilities. Additionally, more research is warranted to determine whether these accountability requirements conflict with the intent of individualized education paramount to the IDEA legislation. Certainly, if educators conceive of accountability conflicting with individualized education, this factor could contribute to role confusion of the special educator. A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals an apparent gap in research focusing specifically on the role of the secondary special educator serving students with mild or high incidence disabilities. Given that students with high incidence or mild disabilities represents more than half of all students with disabilities served in public schools, more research is needed to explore how to best meet their needs.

Given both personal and professional experiences as a special education teacher, administrator, and parent of a student with a disability, I am constantly challenging and comparing what I think I know and what I see happening in the field to the research that exists. In my professional role, I am charged with ensuring that students receive quality services that promote positive outcomes while balancing limited resources and bureaucratic compliance regulations. In my role as a parent of child with a disability, I must advocate for improvements in the bureaucratic institution that has failed to prepare my son adequately for post-secondary success. I continue to grapple with my own divergent set of ideals that demand reflection about what it means to be an effective special educator and about how to best prepare students with disabilities to thrive in society upon graduation from high school. Social constructionism provides a foundation for challenging our own

belief systems and what we choose to identify as meaningful benefits in educational programming for students with disabilities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Improving outcomes for students with disabilities is both a professional and personal goal. However, there appears to be confusion among the following: IDEA regulation definition of special education, the training and licensure of special educators, the day-to-day actions of special education teachers, and what colleagues and supervisors believe are a special educators role responsibilities. This potential role confusion appears to be prevalent when examining the duties of the secondary special educator serving students with mild or high incidence disabilities. Brunsting, Srecknovic, and Lane (2014) question whether role confusion could be a contributing factor to teacher turnover and burnout in the field of special education. More research is needed to better define what it means to be a special educator and how that meaning is constructed. In addition, how do the responsibilities of secondary special educators contribute meaning to the institution of public education and outcomes of students with disabilities?

With regard to utilizing a social constructionist framework for research, Gergen (2015) suggests, “Constructionism invites a certain humility about one’s assumptions and ways of life, fosters curiosity about others’ perspectives and values, and opens the way to replacing the contentious battles over who is right with mutual probing for possibilities” (p.27). When we refuse to challenge our own beliefs, we risk stagnation. Education is evolving and deserves exploration that encourages consideration, reflection, and challenging the status quo so that all students can experience meaningful benefit.

## **Definition of Terms**

The terms that will be used in this research are common to special education practitioners, but may require explicit definition to other educators and readers. The following terms are integral to the understanding of this research:

**Accommodations** is defined by Raymond (2017) as “alterations in the manner in which the student may complete a learning task, but not altering the content” (p. 294).

**Core Content/Curriculum** is defined as the state or local mandated curriculum that schools use to align and guide instruction for all students.

**Co-teaching** defined by Friend (2014) is a “service delivery model in which two educators, one typically a general education teacher and one a special education teacher or other specialist, combine their expertise to jointly teach a heterogeneous group of students, some of whom have disabilities or other special needs, in a single classroom for part or all of the school day” (p. 529).

**Differentiation** as defined by Friend (2014) is “modifying curriculum and other services to meet specific needs of individual learners” (p. 529).

**Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)** was legislation passed by Congress in 1975 to increase federal funding for special education and required states to improve educational programming for students with disabilities (Friend, 2014).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** is the most current reauthorization of the general education federal legislation, by the Obama administration in 2015, previously known as ESEA and NCLB. This legislation focuses on educational equity for all students based on standards that prepare all students for college and career (ESSA, 2015).

**High Incidence Disabilities** represents those disability categories that account for the highest percentage of eligible students served in special education programs, which include students with specific learning disabilities, speech/language impairments, and other health impairments (Raymond, 2017).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** federal legislation reauthorizing and renaming the EHA, passed in 1997 and the name currently associated with special education legislation. This legislation emphasized six main principles: (1) Zero Reject provision indicating that children cannot be excluded from school because of disability, (2) Nondiscriminatory Evaluation ensuring students be evaluated in their primary language, (3) Appropriate education to ensure that schools meet the individual needs of students, (4) Least restrictive environment emphasizing that to the greatest extent possible students with disabilities are educated in or as close to their neighborhood school, with their non-disabled peers, in the general education classroom, (5) Procedural due process that explains that parents and schools have the right to disagree with each others choices related to the development of the students education plan, placement, or assessment; and if the disagreement cannot be resolved, a neutral due process hearing can be held, and (6) Parental and student participation where they are equal partners in the development of the student's education planning process (Friend, 2014).

**Mild Disabilities** are recognized as disabilities that are not visibly recognizable by physical attributes, but rather by a student's inability to learn or process information in the same way as his or her typically developing peers (Raymond, 2017).

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** was federal legislation passed in 2001 and according to Friend, 2017 is "the general education law that shapes many contemporary

education practices, calls for all students to be proficient in reading and math, including students with disabilities” (p. 32) Currently, NCLB is synonymous with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

**Research/Evidence Based Intervention** is a systematic instructional approach that is based on peer reviewed and validated research, designed to meet the unique academic and/or functional skill needs of eligible students, resulting from his or her qualifying disability. As defined by Cook and Cook (2011), “Evidence based practices (EBP) are practices that are supported by multiple, high-quality studies that utilize research designs from which causality can be inferred and that demonstrate meaningful effects on student outcomes” (p.73).

**Response to Intervention/Instruction (RTI)** as defined by Friend (2014) as “An approach (first authorized in IDEA 2004) to identify students as having learning disabilities based on the extent to which their learning accelerates or fails to accelerate when provided with increasingly intense instructional interventions” (p. 534).

**Secondary Special Education Teachers** are those who serve students at the high school level.

**Specially Designed Instruction** as defined by Wright and Wright (2004) “means adapting, as appropriate, to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction—(i) to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability; and (ii) to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that he or she can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children” (p. 149).

**Special Education** as defined by Wright and Wright (2004) as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including (i) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (ii) instruction in physical education” (p.29).

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** as defined by Friend (2014) is “an approach for teaching and learning emphasizing the need to address in instructional planning the entire diversity of student needs” (p. 536).

### **Research Questions**

This research focuses on teachers of students who have been identified as having a high incidence disability (i.e. mild disability), are eligible to receive special education services, and are pursuing a regular high school diploma. The purpose of this research is to understand the perceived roles of secondary special educators, how they developed their role perceptions, and how their role perception determines their job functions. The guiding research question follows: What are the perceived roles of secondary special education teachers who serve students with high incidence disabilities and how do these educators’ role perceptions contribute to their work practices and day-to-day work choices with students and fellow teachers? Several sub-questions follow:

1. How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?
2. To what or whom do secondary level special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?
3. How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and work practices to those learned in their educator preparation programs?



4. Is there a difference in how special educators define their own roles and how they perceive their colleagues to define their role in educating students with disabilities?
5. What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?

This study adds to the body of research surrounding the delivery of special education at the secondary level and the perceived expectations of the teachers in this field regarding their daily professional activities and what defines them in their school communities.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The process of educating students with disabilities is both challenging and rewarding. According to Rumrill, Cook, and Wiley (2011), “Special education is a multifaceted and extensive service delivery system” (p. 3). Given the diverse needs of students, the educators charged with designing and providing special education services require specialized training and support to effectively meet the academic and functional needs of their students (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017b). This study seeks to explore how high school level special education teachers, serving students with mild or high incidence disabilities, perceive or construct their professional roles and how their roles influence their professional practices. According to Raymond (2017), high incidence disabilities are defined as those most often occurring in the overall eligible population and including primarily students with less severe disabilities such as Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Mild Intellectual Disabilities, and Other Health Impairments (OHI).

An extensive review of literature reveals that historical and philosophical convictions about special education, the negotiation of conflicting interests and expectations, along with an identified research to practice gap all contribute to differing constructs of professional practice for this select group of special educators. In this chapter, I will review literature relative to the three distinct periods in the modern history of special education, the philosophical constructs that influence special education practices, the negotiation of conflicting interests and expectations within the field, and the theory to practice gap. I will conclude this chapter with a critique of the literature, my guiding theoretical framework, and implications for future research.

## **Historical and Philosophical Constructs of Special Education/Educators**

The field of special education is constantly evolving as our society changes and the variety of demands placed on our educational institution are continually challenged by the differing ideals of both internal (teachers, administrators, and other school staff) and external (parents, community agencies, and businesses) stakeholders. Like any institution or organization, historical foundations anchor our approaches while we negotiate the diverse philosophical ideals of our stakeholders. This leads one to question whether individual actors create the institution or whether the institution creates each individual? Early social constructionist theorists Berger and Luckmann (1966) posit that “the typifications of habitualized actions that constitute institutions are always shared ones; they are available to all the members of the particular social group in question, and the institution itself typifies individual actors as well as individual actions” (p.51). Understanding the ways we construct our beliefs about our professional and personal roles in society is important to how we define what it means to be a special education teacher. The expectations of our society shape our institution of public education. In order to meet these demands, we must be willing to reevaluate our past and current practices, while striving to improve the overall effectiveness of the organization. Special education has a rich history with many conflicting interests that require constant negotiation. According to Osgood (2008), our field has moved from restricted access for special education students to segregated schools and classrooms only, to instruction alongside of non-disabled peers. Today, there is more emphasis on effective and inclusive practices for students with disabilities (Osgood, 2008). According to the NCES (2017), since the 1990-1991 school year, the number of students with disabilities who are served 80% or more of the day in

classes with their non-disabled peers, also known as the regular continuum, has almost doubled. Yet, according to the US Department of Education (2016), the academic proficiencies and graduation rates are still significantly lower for students with disabilities when compared to those of their non-disabled peers. In order to better understand special education, it is important to examine its origin and evolution.

**Historical constructs.** The historical constructs of special education appear to parallel the societal constructs of the era. The modern history of special education has evolved over the past century and can be grouped into three distinct periods that describe each particular time in history. These three time periods and their corresponding historical themes are: mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which can be categorized as segregated custodial care; the civil rights era where children with disabilities were given access to public education; and the late 20<sup>th</sup> to current 21<sup>st</sup> century where an increased focus is placed on the inclusion of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers and improved achievement for all students. The professional practices of public schools and educators charged with delivering quality instruction to all students, including children with disabilities, must evolve as our societal expectations change.

*Mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: optional segregated & institutional care.* Prior to the 1960s, children with disabilities were not guaranteed access to public education (Osgood, 2008). During this time, public education was the responsibility of state and local governments with little influence or oversight from the federal government. From the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century there was no federal legislation regulating the education of students with disabilities. At this time children with disabilities were treated much like adults with disabilities and were segregated into specialized schools

or institutions that focused primarily on custodial care and life skills instruction (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). The treatment of individuals in many of these specialized facilities was often less than humane and an academic focus found in traditional schools was often non-existent (Osgood, 2008; Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011).

There were specialized schools in more urban areas, but many rural communities had little to offer children with disabilities (Osgood, 2008). During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in New York City, Elizabeth Farrell began her work in designing the ungraded classroom for students with differences, and developed a framework for purposeful individualized instruction (Kode, 2017). However, most specialized schools or institutions were established to provide families with care for their children with disabilities (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). At this time in history there was an increase of psychological research, which led to the rise of advocacy groups aimed at improving educational opportunities and the overall quality of life for individuals with disabilities. The new focus on improved access to public schools for all children was on the horizon.

***Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century- civil rights and federal legislation for access to public school.***

The onset of the civil rights movement led to the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, which was the first law that addressed the education of students with disabilities (Friend, 2014). However, Public Law 94-142 was a monumental piece of federal legislation passed in 1975 with the purpose to secure access to education for all students with disabilities. Also, during the 1970s was the initial push for students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum. Students with disabilities were enrolling in public schools and teacher preparation programs were expanding to train specialized teachers to serve students with disabilities. The educational focus for this population of student was more prescriptive

and predominately addressed functional academics and life skills (Friend, 2014). With only one revision in 1986 to expand services to infants and young children, the reauthorization in 1990 renamed this law to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the name that most people are familiar with (Friend, 2014). During this period of time, the focus of special education was to provide access to public education to all children with disabilities.

The role of the special educator was changing. This led to the rise of resource continuums, which required special educators to provide direct instruction to small groups of students in the resource room and specific remediation for academic areas to support students' access to their general education classes. Direct instruction as defined by Friend (2014), is "a comprehensive, highly structured, teacher-led instructional approach that emphasizes maximizing not only the quantity of instruction students receive, but also the quality" (p. 529). According to Hoover and Patton (2008), the historical roles of special educators during this time included a skill set that required these teachers to have highly specialized knowledge of programs, techniques and strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities who were predominantly served in self-contained classrooms. These special education teachers were also responsible for teaching a variety of content areas since they were responsible for their students throughout the instructional day. General education teachers had very little responsibility, if any, to the education of students with disabilities. Access to public schools was offered, yet segregated instruction and classes was the primary practice for educating students with disabilities.

***Late 20<sup>th</sup> century to present: Inclusive and rigorous achievement for all students.***

During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a national focus on public education intensified as the result of President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education publication in 1983,

*A Nation At Risk*. According to Mehta (2015), this publication has drastically changed the landscape of public education by emphasizing standards-based accountability for public school students. At the onset of this period in history, students with disabilities were still not held to the same standards, often being exempt from tests or provided alternative curriculums and assessments (Friend, 2014).

The turn of the century paved the way for the emergence of educational reform. During the transition from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a prevalence of educational research in addition to increased litigation and parent advocacy efforts led to more current revisions to IDEA in 1997 (Osgood, 2008). The more current revisions to IDEA expanded the role of general education teachers in the education of students with disabilities (Friend, 2014). No longer was it the sole responsibility of special education teachers to provide access to the general content and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities. General education teachers were now required to participate in planning for, providing accommodations, and teaching students with disabilities.

In 2004, another revision was to ensure IDEA's alignment with all federal general education laws (IDEA, 2004). This revision followed the historic No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which required grade level standards-based accountability for all students, including those with disabilities (NCLB, 2001). These monumental laws have influenced how we define special education, and how educators perceive the role and duties of the special educator (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010).

Currently, there is an increased demand for improving special education services as a whole and promoting more inclusive practices for students with disabilities. The skill set of special educators must broaden to include a stronger focus on collaboration with other

educators and differentiating instruction to support students' access and progress in the general classroom (Friend, 2014). Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention/Instruction (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) now require special education teachers to redefine their roles, yet again, all three of these pedagogical frameworks require all teachers to address the unique learning needs of all students, providing differentiated instruction and evidence based interventions to both enrich and remediate skills within the general curriculum. This requires collaboration between general education teachers, who are considered the content experts, and special education teachers, who are considered the intervention experts (Friend, 2014; Simonsen et. al., 2010). Hoover and Patton (2008) identify five critical areas that currently define the skill set required of special educators. These include: (1) data-driven decision-making, (2) implementing evidence-based interventions, (3) differentiating instruction, (4) implementing socio-emotional behavioral supports, and (5) collaboration. In addition to those professional skills, special education teachers continue to be responsible for an extraordinary amount of paperwork required to meet the procedural regulations found within IDEA. Hoover and Patton (2008) also assert that the special educator is not just responsible for students who are identified and eligible for special education, but also for those non-eligible students deemed at-risk. Policies regarding funding for special education will require some revision to make this more current model feasible, as there are many restrictions on how monies for special education can be spent. Specifically, state and federal funds allocated to school districts for the provision of special education can only be used for resources and services provided to students who are eligible (NC Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities, 2014). In addition to the above outlined historical influences on special



education practices, the negotiation of conflicting philosophical constructs impacts how services are provided and how special educators perform their professional duties.

**Philosophical constructs.** Institutional practices are constructed by the historical and philosophical ideology of the internal and external stakeholders. The beliefs about how to best educate students with disabilities are as diverse as the abilities and needs of all students. Throughout our history, we have had to construct our views on the purpose of special education based on societal expectations, legislative regulations, and evolving research in the field. Changes in epistemologies in turn shape and revise our practices within the institution. For example, some educators believe that students have a fixed or established intelligence that predetermines their ability to learn and acquire new skills, while other educators believe that intelligence is fluid and can grow based on experiences and access to new knowledge (Dweck, 2006). These philosophical constructs influence our expectations and perceptions about how we educate students with disabilities, and how we construct the roles of the special educator.

Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, there have only been a few revisions to this initial legislation. According to Friend (2014), throughout the field of public education, there is much debate on how to effectively and efficiently teach students and meet the high demands of standard-based accountability. When addressing the needs of students with disabilities, the stakes are higher given that many of these students are already behind their peers academically. Pedagogical approaches have fluctuated and are often the result of the political atmosphere occurring at the time. To better understand the main differences in philosophy around special education services and the role of the special educator, we must understand the impact of federal

legislation around educating all students as a result of high stakes accountability, the cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) passed in 2001.

Historical research of special education typically focuses on the legal and legislative actions that regulate policies and practices. Policies and practices are based on the federal legislation, but how states and local districts interpret these common regulations can lead to very different actions. Practitioners in the field exhibit a range of philosophical viewpoints on the purpose of special education. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker, (2010) assert that there is now a “blurring” of special education, as a result of the rise of the Response to Intervention/Instruction (RTI) movement, particularly with regard to the role of the special educator who was expected to provide prescriptive skill specific instruction to eligible students with disabilities, but is now expected to collaborate with the general education colleagues on how to differentiate the core curriculum for all students.

Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010) identified two distinctly different ideologies regarding special education and categorized these into the IDEA group and NCLB group. The IDEA group approaches services from a top-down mentality, promoting services for students with disabilities to be tailored to their individual needs, utilizing more clinical and experimental approaches delivered by highly trained special educators. In practice, this allows special educators to target the skill specific deficits related to the qualifying disability, whether or not that is in alignment with the grade level standards. The NCLB group takes a bottom-up approach, believing that all students should be held to same grade level standards. The NCLB group emphasizes the blurring of special education and general education, eliminating self-contained and resource settings for students with disabilities and educating all students in the general education classroom. Fuchs et al. (2010) advocate for

special educators to return to a more clinical or experimental teaching approach to best meet the needs of students with disabilities.

In a somewhat different view, Simonsen et al. (2010) propose that special education teachers should be redefined as interventionists. The current rise in schools utilizing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework to address the needs of all learners makes it essential that experts in intervention, as defined by these authors as special educators, expands the role of the special education teacher to provide services to students with disabilities as prescribed by the IEP and, in addition, to serve as interventionists with heavy involvement in the MTSS process for non-disabled students (Simonsen et al., 2010). Simonsen et al. (2010) make a valid point that special educators have strong knowledge of intervention approaches; however they do not provide adequate specificity on how to utilize special education teacher services for all students, given the strict federal and state regulations regarding allocation of special education funds.

The historical and philosophical influences that contribute meaning to how special education is defined and what is expected of special educators in their day-to-day professional activities guides practice. It is my notion that special educators' perceptions of their place in the educational institution are a product of this constant negotiation between varying interests and expectations. In order to better understand how such competing iterations of the roles of special educators impact practice one must examine studies around the duties of special educators and the expectations of their supervisors and evaluators, typically school administrators.

## **Negotiating Conflicting Interests and Expectations**

A review of research and personal experiences in the field over the past 20 years has revealed that special education teachers perform many different tasks throughout the school day. In this section, I review literature focused on studies that identify discrepancies in how special educators are trained and licensed, professional practices of secondary special educators, perceptions of the role of the special educator, expectations of administrators who supervise these teachers, and expectation and role definitions provided for the special educator by their general education peers. In order to understand better the perceived roles of secondary special education teachers, it is important to examine (1) how these educators were trained prior to entering the profession, (2) role expectations and perceptions of the special educator, (3) the expectations of the general education colleagues with whom they work, and the administrators who supervise them. All of these factors significantly influence how special education teachers perceive their roles, and in turn, how they deliver the professional activities that impact the education of the students they serve.

**Inconsistencies in the training and licensure of special educators.** Teacher education preparation programs and licensing practices are not created equal. In the heated political climate of the United States, there are many opposing viewpoints surrounding states' rights versus federal control. Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and state educator licensing organizations mirror the politicized landscape of this country. Therefore, it should be no surprise that there are differing conceptualizations of the best practices regarding preparing effective special educators for the demanding expectations of the job. According to Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely (2015), "Political pundits assert traditional teacher preparation has been ineffective in preparing pre-service teachers to be able to

secure adequate student achievement gains” (p.27). Leko et al. (2015) go on to explain that the heightened emphasis on more rigorous curriculum and accountability has changed the overall demands on special educators, thus broadening the licensing patterns to meet personnel shortages in the field of special education. In contrast, Newton, Kennedy, Walther-Thomas, & Cornett (2012), state “it is largely unfair to criticize schools of education for the frequent mismatch between preparation and the reality of special education settings in schools” (p.3), given that “each district or school maintains its own interpretation of instructional settings for students with disabilities” (p.3). Once trained and licensed, the actual role expectations may or may not reflect what was covered during the preparation program.

Examining the research associated with traditional IHE preparation programs, Rock and Billingsley (2014) use a virtual world metaphor to describe the ever-evolving reality of special education in public schools and the role of the special educator. They suggest that IHE must continually evolve to better equip prospective teachers, preparing them to adapt to continuous changes in the field. In reviewing their research, they advocate for IHE programs that provide differentiation training based on the age of students, increasing more clinical experiences for pre-service teachers, and improving leadership preparation and professional development. Additionally, they question whether or not traditional IHE and alternative licensing programs are staying abreast of the realities special education teachers have on the job.

Similar to Rock and Billingsley’s (2014) work, another theme emerged suggesting that colleges have remained fixed to traditional methods in teacher education preparation programs for both general and special educators (Newton, Kennedy, Walther-Thomas, &

Cornett, 2012). These authors acknowledge the challenge that colleges experience when trying to develop programs for special educators, given the wide array of responsibilities prospective teachers will experience. In consideration of the many roles and responsibilities, they recommend tailoring preparation programs to two different teacher types; special educators as co-teachers and interventionists. The special educator as co-teacher would focus more on the general curriculum, adaptation techniques, accommodations, collaboration and consultation approaches. The special educator as interventionist would provide training in tiered level interventions that address specific skill deficits. Both would be used to promote learning for all students, with and without disabilities. The authors also suggest that the trend of generalization in licensing practices, coupled with the highly qualified requirements (as put forth in ESSA, 2015) may require school districts and colleges to revisit how special educators are trained and licensed, suggesting special educators become specialists in one area.

The concept of special educators working with all students appears in many more recent publications. Another idea found in more current literature is defining the special educators role in teaching the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Murphy and Marshall (2015) conducted research involving focus studies consisting of pre-service teachers and professors in general and special education programs at five colleges across two states in the southeast. In this collective case study approach, the researchers wanted to discover how teacher preparation programs are delivering instruction on the CCSS. The findings from this research suggest that special education professors experience less confidence and knowledge of the need for incorporating pre-service instruction on the CCSS, as compared with their regular education professor counterparts. Both professor

groups stated that there were inconsistencies across IHE programs and state educational agencies (SEA). Information gathered from pre-service general and special educators revealed both groups reported a surface level understanding of CCSS. These researchers suggest there is a need for better collaboration and partnerships between IHEs and SEAs to strengthen alignment between preparation programs and school level expectations.

If alignment is an issue, there is additional research that suggests there are two different theoretical frameworks related to special education preparation and licensure reform, the formalist structure and the deregulation approach (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). A formalist approach advocates for more specialized preparation tailored to differing disability groups and grade or age levels, which is in contrast with a deregulation approach focusing more on a broad generalist preparation program. Leko et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive review of literature in their special feature article taking on a formalist approach to aligning pre-service preparation and licensure processes for special educators. Like many other researchers, they agree that meaningful practice-based experiences must be increased. They promote specific subsections of licensure and position types within the field of special education, allowing special educators to show expertise in a particular area, instead of being expected to master a broad range of skills. Such distinctions include differentiating between elementary and secondary levels and/or between modified/adapted curriculum and general curriculum. Leko et al. (2015) expose major inconsistencies between state requirements for licensing teachers in special education, and many variances in alternative routes to licensure, which they suggest can weaken the overall quality of special educators.

The field of special education has continued to face a shortage of teachers over the past two decades. According to Tyler and Brunner (2014), the attrition rate for special education teachers is much greater than general education teachers, with 98% of schools across the country reporting shortages in trained special educators. Traditional training and licensure approaches have failed to produce the number of special education teachers required to fill the vacancies. Staffing shortages resulted in alternative licensure processes to fill positions in schools throughout the country. According to the US Department of Education (2016), during the 2013-2014 school year, there were 93.9% full-time equivalent highly qualified special education teachers and paraprofessionals serving students with disabilities in public schools across this nation. An operational definition of a highly qualified special educator is defined by the Council for Exceptional Children (2015) as exhibiting knowledge and understanding of the key elements of the following seven standards: (1) Learner development and individual learning differences; (2) Learning environments; (3) Curricular Content Knowledge; (4) Assessment; (5) Instructional Planning and Strategies; (6) Professional Learning and Ethical Practice; and (7) Collaboration. The highly qualified status can be achieved by both traditional and alternative licensing methods. With such a high percentage of highly qualified staff serving students with disabilities, one may question why the outcomes for these students are subpar.

In summation, it appears that inconsistencies in the preparation and licensing of special educators may also contribute to the role confusion experienced on the job. Given that special educator attrition rates are high and academic outcomes for students with disabilities continue to be significantly below that of their non-disabled peers, it appears



that quality pre-service training and continual professional development is warranted to support special educators (Boe & Cook, 2006; US Department of Education, 2016). These supports should clearly align with the commonly expected duties of these professionals.

**Duties of special education teachers.** What are the actual duties of special education teachers? The daily activities of this group of educators are quite diverse depending on the school culture, grade level, and individual needs of the students they serve. In addition, the interpretation of policies that trickle down from the federal level to state and local education agencies can be operationalized very differently. In this section, I focus on the research that investigates, specifically, the role and duties of special educators and how these can vary based on many different factors.

Prior to the implemented regulations resulting from the 2004 revision of IDEA and the enactment of NCLB in 2001, a comprehensive survey study conducted by Wasburn-Moses (2005) explored the professional lives of secondary special education teachers in Michigan. This study focused only on special educators who taught students with learning disabilities. Their findings revealed that the secondary special educators spent the majority of their time teaching high school course content to students with disabilities in special education classrooms, providing accommodations, adapting the curriculum, and completing paperwork. They spent much less time working on their Individual Education Program (IEP) goals. It is important to note that this study was completed prior to when the highly qualified requirements of NCLB went into effect and is based on survey data collected from secondary special educators in the state of Michigan only. These findings raise the question to the purpose of developing IEP goals if the special educator does not address the goals in his or her daily work activities.

In a different study, Wasburn-Moses and Bouck (2007) conducted a survey of high school special education teachers in Michigan public schools. The teacher groups were divided up between those who primarily taught students with learning disabilities (LD) and those who taught students with mild mental impairments (MMI). The researchers found that there was very little difference in the instructional model utilized by both groups of teachers, even though the characteristics of the groups of students would seemingly be very different. Both groups show similarities in the amount of time they reported for providing direct instruction (57%), consulting (4.8%), and completing paperwork (3.5%). The researchers discovered key differences between the two groups, including teachers serving the mild mentally impaired population spent considerably more time adapting materials and providing accommodations (31.4%) than their colleagues teaching the LD groups (16.7%). The teachers serving the LD groups (14.8%) spent significantly more time re-teaching core content than teachers serving the MMI groups (0%).

Wasburn-Moses and Bouck (2007) suggest that high school special education teachers may not be considering the full range of students' needs, including academic, functional, vocational, and social. In addition, this study found that special education teachers across both teaching groups spent more time on teaching content than on non-core courses such as life skills or vocational skills. The authors speculate that the demand for high stakes accountability and rigor may be a contributing factor to this phenomenon. While the researchers offer limitations that include using a self-report survey that was only conducted in one state, they do suggest that their findings support a need for further research around the role of the special education teacher across grade levels and groups of

students with various disabilities, how teachers are trained and licensed, and aligning instructional practices with expected outcomes for students with disabilities.

In a similar study that focused on inclusive practices within a secondary vocational program, Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, and McGinley (2001) explored the duties of special education teachers, referred to as coaches, and their collaborative and instructional practices with general education teachers and students. This two year longitudinal case study examined a modified collaborative-consultation model for serving students with disabilities at a new technical high school. The researchers used observation and interviews with selected school stakeholders to identify the perceived strengths and challenges of implementing this model in an inclusive technical high school. The information gathered resulted in four overarching themes: (1) shifting understanding of responsibilities, (2) negotiating and nurturing relationships with teachers and students, (3) support for the coaches (special educators), and (4) perceived benefits for teachers and students.

These researchers found that participants perceived better collaboration between general and special education faculty and a richer collaborative relationship between special educators and students with disabilities that they serve. This school was also implementing a model of student led IEP meetings, which fostered students' understanding and responsibility/accountability in developing their own annual goals. While this study did not intend to track specific academic growth measures for students with disabilities, the participants reported that many of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade students with disabilities were accepted into one of their top three preferred choice career areas upon entering the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This acceptance was based on grades and behavior.

However, researchers discovered some challenges with this model. First, it included limited opportunities for students with disabilities who needed more intensive services outside the general education classroom, making it difficult to schedule interventions. Next, they found the scheduling demands for the two learning support coaches (special education teachers) left little time for tutoring during the instructional day. Finally they identified a lack of training for general education teachers on the differences between content enhancements/strategies and student specific strategies.

Inclusive practices and co-teaching have been a focus in special education particularly at the secondary level over the past two decades. Wiess and Lloyd (2002) conducted a qualitative conceptual design study that examined and described the roles and instructional actions of secondary special educators, both in co-teaching and special education classrooms. The theoretical basis for the study utilized grounded theory and symbolic interactionism. Participants were selected from a middle and high school within one LEA to control for consistency among district policies, expectations, and supports. These researchers analyzed the actions of special educators in both co-teaching and special education classes. In addition, they interviewed only the special educators regarding their perceptions about co-teaching and special education in general. They found that four specific roles emerged for special educators at the secondary level; these roles include: (1) providing support to students using the general curriculum; (2) to teach the general content but in a separate classroom; (3) teaching a different part of the content in the same classroom to the entire class; (4) teaching as a team, where both instructors delivered instruction interchangeably, which included planning together for the content, instructional strategies, and accommodations. The latter role seldom occurred (16%) in this study. These

researchers “found that special educators implemented co-teaching in a variety of ways based on their definitions of co-teaching and internal and external influences on the classroom”(p. 66).

Overall, results from the Wiess and Lloyd (2002) study supported findings from previous research, which include barriers created by the secondary school model such as scheduling and the wider student skill gaps combined with the expanded curricula expectations for all students. The variability in the implementation of true co-teaching models that provide common planning and training for teachers was evident. And finally, the special educator participants in this study used their specialized instructional training more frequently in their own classroom than when co-teaching in the general education setting. Many comparisons were made to other research reviewed prior to this study. For example, the researchers relied heavily on a 1997 study by Boudah, Schumaker, and Deshler that found that even after training and monitoring effective co-teaching practices, students with disabilities test and quiz scores decreased.

The previous studies were based on teacher surveys, which required special education teachers to self-report on how they spend their time and their perceived duties. The researchers for the next study found that there was limited literature regarding how special education teachers use their time during the instructional day. In an attempt to measure the actual activities that special educators do throughout the instructional day, Vannest and Hagen-Burke (2010) designed a study that required special education teachers to use technology to record activities in a given time period. The purpose of their study was to design a valid and reliable method for measuring activities performed by special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities, throughout the

instructional day. Using technology to track both time and activities, along with direct observational data collected randomly on all participating special education teachers, the researchers determined that the method they developed yielded both reliable and valid results. Vannest and Hagen-Burke (2010) conducted this research with 11 participating schools situated in two districts in central Texas. These researchers found 12 common activities performed by all special education teachers across four instructional setting types. The top three activities that account for nearly half of these teachers' instructional day included academic instruction (16%), instructional support (15%), and paperwork (12%). While the percentages vary between the four setting types (self-contained, resource, content-mastery, and co-teaching), these still remain the top three activities performed by these teachers. When the researchers combined activities into common themes for example, grouping academic instruction, non-academic instruction, and instructional support, they found that approximately 40% of their time was devoted to providing direct instruction to students during the instructional day. When looking at special education settings and comparing time use of special education teachers, these researchers found that those serving students in a resource model had the highest percentage of time dedicated to academic instruction. The other three settings experienced higher amounts of time devoted to discipline, supervision, and paperwork.

The previous study did not differentiate between grade levels of the special education teachers; however, the information gleaned provided insight into the activities special education teachers performed throughout the day. While activities alone do not define a profession, they do give insight into the perceived roles and expectations of special educators. How teachers perceive themselves, in combination with how their colleagues

and students perceive them influence their professional identity. In turn, those perceptions held by self and others may guide the professional activities exhibited.

Following the 2004 IDEA revisions and the regulations published from NCLB legislation, a heavy emphasis was placed on utilizing research-based instructional practices in both general and special education. The push for inclusive education that became popular in the late 1980s and through the 1990s focused more on students with disabilities being educated alongside their non-disabled peers in the general curriculum and less on targeted direct instruction that was provided in more restrictive settings, particularly at the secondary level. According to Vaughn and Swanson (2015), research specific to effective reading approaches for secondary students with disabilities, found that special educators must base their instructional delivery on research-based practices that yield positive results for students with disabilities. Likewise, Kucharczyk et al. (2015) emphasized the need for school-wide evidence-based approaches to meet the social and functional needs of students with mild forms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who spend the majority of their instructional day with non-disabled peers. Almost all research reviewed shared the expectation that instruction should be evidence-based for all students (Kucharczyk et al., 2015; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015).

To better understand the constant negotiation of duties, the focus that the previous studies had on research-based instruction compared to evidence-based approaches is another source of conflicting meaning making. Cook and Cook (2011) attempted to define evidence-based practices (EBP) in education and to delineate between EBP and other terms. Similar terminology, such as research-based practices, best or recommended practices is often used synonymously or interchangeably, when the meanings are very

different. These authors define EBP as “practices that are supported by multiple, high quality studies that utilize research designs from which causality can be inferred and that demonstrate meaningful effects on student outcomes” (p.73). The authors provide specific criteria for the study designs used and the corresponding effect sizes of the study outcomes. They point out that educators are often confused by the various terms used to describe practices. For example, research-based infers that a practice is grounded in research. However, there may be only one study that could be considered empirically based, therefore not meeting the rigor to be considered evidence based practice (Cook & Cook, 2011). Likewise, terms such as *best practice* or *recommended practice* may be based on the opinion of a perceived expert while having limited empirical support to be applied to a certain population. Finally, these authors point out that while many educators may be familiar with or trained in EBPs, this does not guarantee that they will implement such practices, or implement to the degree of fidelity to which the EBP was validated.

The research reviewed indicates that the actual duties performed by special educators are as diverse as the needs of the students they serve. Looking at the professional practices through a social constructionist lens, we can see that actual duties can define expected practices, which in turn can influence the perceptions of the professional role. How educators define the very language used to describe the professional activities performed can negotiate their duties. Research shows that role perception can be very different based on the position one holds (i.e., special educator, administrator, general educator, etc.) and how one completes daily duties.

**Perceptions of the role of the special educator.** What does it mean to be a special educator and how do these professionals define their role in the educational institution?



There are many factors that influence how special educators perceive their roles. In a qualitative study conducted by Urbach, Moore, Klingner, Galman, Haager, Brownell and Dingle (2015) the purpose was to seek understanding of special educators' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities. In particular, the researchers wanted to see if there were differing beliefs between those teachers who were rated more and less accomplished. The researchers used a reading observation tool to group the teachers into the more and less accomplished categories. Both groups participated in a semi-structured interview to determine their beliefs about the role of the special educator and effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. The researchers found that more accomplished special educators believed their role was to provide systematic and explicit individualized instruction, modify and adapt curriculum to meet the students' needs, utilize action-based communication processes with families, and advocate on behalf of their students. In contrast, less accomplished special educators viewed their instructional role as more flexible with less intensity, modifying or adapting curriculum in general to make it more motivating to students, utilizing more passive modes of communication with families, and focusing on protecting students rather than advocating for them. While both groups recognized the importance of building relationships with students, the less accomplished teachers found relationship building as a means to an end and were more likely to use external influences as an excuse for poor student progress. More accomplished teachers adopted a more "teach regardless" attitude, which emphasized their responsibility to educate students regardless of external influences.

In an exploratory review of research, Major (2012) identifies high special educator turnover based on several internal and external influences, including three distinct

characteristics. The first is that special educators do not have the appropriate amount of time and resources to really know the abilities and needs of the students on their caseloads. Second, most special educators do not have extensive knowledge of the general curriculum as it relates to the expectations of the students they serve. The final characteristic is that special educators lack knowledge in the areas of pedagogical techniques to meet the needs of their students. Major recommends a bottom-up approach to meet the needs of special educators by providing autonomy in their work, lessening the burden of paperwork, minimizing the threats of litigation, reducing administrative duties, and empowering teachers rather than providing strict authoritarian leadership. It is important to note that in this article there is a lack of empirical research to verify the effectiveness of any of these recommendations.

When examining how special educators perceive their role, particularly in comparison to their general education colleagues, questions can arise pertaining to the purpose of special education in general. Kusuma-Powell and Powell (2016) suggest a possible hierarchy in status between general and special educators. This article highlights the low or no status parallel between students with disabilities and the special educators who teach them. The authors assert that special educators are often perceived to be lower in status by their general education colleagues, administrators, and even students. The authors note that this is not necessarily intentional, but it is rather a result of how schools prioritize programs and support staff. The authors contend that this devaluing of special educators has escalated as a result of an increase in inclusive practices and co-teaching. They note that in the past, when special educators served students through pullout models, their roles were more clearly defined. Providing services and supports in a general education setting

seems to create ambiguity about the role of the special educator without pre-established goals, planning, and collaboration. These authors suggest that current special education teachers require several specific skill sets which include: knowing how to be leaders of adult learners and students with disabilities, being comfortable and confident facilitating in a variety of groups, staying current on research within their field, a willingness to assert themselves with authority, and establishing credibility among their peers and colleagues.

Regardless of how special educators perceive their roles, they are continually balancing the expectations of their colleagues, supervisors, students, and parents. This negotiation, whether consciously recognized or not, constructs their perceptions of what it means to teach students with disabilities. In the following section, I examine how the expectations of school administrators influence role perception and potentially contribute to role confusion of the special educators they supervise.

**Expectations of school administrators who supervise special educators.** The role of the school administrator has changed drastically over the last decade to focus more on instructional leadership, while still encompassing the previously held managerial responsibilities (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Serving as an instructional leader, supervising and evaluating all educational professionals can be a daunting task for administrators, particularly at the secondary level, given the vast differences of specialized content expertise in one building. In the field of special education, the demands are different than most general educators and the burnout and teacher turnover rates are considerably higher (Brunsting, Sreckovic & Lane, 2014). The research reviewed in this section will focus on administrators' knowledge of special education, their expectations of

special education teachers, and their influence on constructing the role of the special educators they supervise, support and evaluate.

School administrators have diverse professional backgrounds. They are leaders who oversee many different educators that specialize in a variety of subject areas, but these administrators cannot be expected to be an expert in all fields of education. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) conducted a national survey of secondary school principals to explore their attitudes, knowledge, and practices related to special education. The researchers analyzed prior studies that focused on administrator training and knowledge of effective special education practices. This study was conducted using randomly selected principals from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The researchers' conceptual framework was based on exploring both the fundamental knowledge of special education and current issues in the field of all the participants in the study.

The researchers found that in general, secondary principals reported being well informed of the fundamental issues associated with special education. Fundamental issues were defined as understanding the history of IDEA and the importance of educating students with disabilities. The participants acknowledged limited understanding of more current issues, such as self-determination practices, functional behavioral assessments, and universally designed lessons. Additional key findings included that most participants agreed that all students should have access to the general curriculum, fewer participants believed that students had access to the general education classroom, and more than 30% of participants indicated having no or limited knowledge of universally designed lessons. Also, most participants reported receiving little information or training in special education

as part of their administration licensure program. Finally, almost all participants accepted responsibility for the education of all students, even if they did not believe that all students' assessment scores should count in the school accountability model.

The relationship between teachers and their administrators is paramount in that administrators are normally tasked with evaluating teaching. Most teachers, regardless of what subject they teach, strive to meet the expectations of their supervisor. Steinbrecher et al. (2015) utilized a qualitative, constant-comparative study design to determine the kinds of special education knowledge and skills that administrators identify as important for special educators to possess and how these align with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) standards. The study participants were elementary principals from both a midsize and large school district located in the Southwestern part of the United States. A structured interview and coding was the method used to analyze results. These researchers found that most administrators who participated in this study had limited knowledge and operationalized understanding of evidence-based practices to be employed by special education teachers. Additionally, Steinbrecher et al. (2015) found that administrators favored delivery of content curriculum over meeting the specific needs of individual students. Administrators saw special educators as more responsible for curriculum implementation than general education teachers, and failed to mention the importance of progress monitoring for deficit skill areas indicated in IEPs.

With regard to indicators more closely associated with affective qualities, these researchers found that administrators identified dispositions of special educators as patient and flexible. Administrator participants, however, failed to address the importance of advocacy skills and engagement in professional organizations outside of the school

community for special educators. These same administrators did acknowledge the importance of special educators understanding the IDEA laws, policies, and documentation as a means of mitigating risk, rather than improving student success or collaboration with families. While this study provided insight into what the participant administrators expected from the special educators they supervised, the next few studies examine the methods used to evaluate special education teachers and how those may or may not align with the roles special education teachers perform.

School leadership has a strong impact on the culture and success of the school as a whole (Reeves, 2006). Teacher evaluation is a highly debated and politicized topic that has gained national attention. In particular, there is increased attention on value-added models of teacher evaluation. Steinbrecher, Selig, Cosbey and Thorstensen (2014) summarized the challenges in utilizing a value-added model for effectively assessing all teachers, but especially in evaluating special educators given the individualized needs and characteristics of the students they serve. Their review did not delve deeply into the specific role of the special educator but focused primarily on the inability to accurately evaluate special educators using a value-added method. This assertion leads to more important questions regarding evaluation of special educators, specifically how to design evaluation around the roles and responsibilities of the special educator.

Accurate and fair performance evaluations for special education teachers should be based on clear expectations related to the role and the supervisors responsible for completing these evaluations must share in the understanding of such role expectations. In a review of research on teacher evaluation processes, Sledge and Pazez (2013) found that a very low number of states/districts have a different evaluation tool for special educators.

They noted that many school leaders who had a solid understanding of the role of the special educators reported trying to alter evaluation tools to better reflect the unique duties of the special educators. These researchers also discovered that most special educators received a positive evaluation with little to no regard for student outcomes. There were several recommendations offered by Sledge and Pazey (2013). First, evaluation rubrics need to meet the specific job expectations of special education teachers. In addition to a job-specific rubric, there must be training provided to administrators completing evaluations on expected practices. Next, an overall evaluation process should also include at least one peer observation completed by a master special educator. Another suggestion was to include student outcome data in the evaluation process. These researchers suggest that if this element becomes policy, student data used should be based on growth made on IEP goals, rather than on a standardized assessment.

Exploring the research devoted solely to special educator evaluation yielded very few studies. However, Woolf (2015) took on the challenge of conducting a survey of fully certified special education teachers, credentialed school administrators, and accredited special education teacher preparation program representatives in a large, densely populated northeastern region of the United States. The research purpose was to see if each of these stakeholder groups perceived the expectations of special educators to be in alignment with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) standards on special educator effectiveness, to rank the importance of such skills, and to determine if there were differing rank patterns between the stakeholder groups. The findings from this study indicated that all stakeholder groups ranked each of the CEC skill sets as highly important. Woolf acknowledged that the

majority of participants were either members or subscribers of CEC, which could have biased the survey sample.

The CEC is the professional organization representing special educator stakeholder groups. The CEC published an article with this exact purpose in mind. Their recommendations included that all teachers be evaluated on the same instrument, with special educator roles being defined from year to year as they may change (Teaching Exceptional Children, 2013). However, they did not provide any specific examples on how such roles or expectations were defined. The CEC does provide a broad and brief job profile for special educators serving students with high-incidence disabilities in a resource and/or inclusion setting, but this profile basically describes the use of co-teaching and resource environments, not specific actions that a supervisor or evaluator would observe the special educator performing in his or her daily professional activities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015). Without specific and observable actions defined, it is difficult for an evaluator to objectively assess a special educators performance. For example, it would be difficult to use the same evaluation rubric for a teacher working with students with significant disabilities on a modified curriculum as compared to a teacher working with students with milder disabilities, who are following the general curriculum.

Another significant assertion made is that the CEC is not in support of the use of IEP goal progress data as a measure of teacher effectiveness. The association does, however, promote the use of student growth data but does not specify from what sources. Reflecting back to an earlier part of this literature review, it would appear that the CEC is more aligned to the NCLB camp with regard to their position on special education and the role of the special educator. The CEC recommends that training is needed for school



leaders on evidence-based practices for educating students with disabilities, in addition to effective evaluation practices that reflect the role of the special educator (Teaching Exceptional Children, 2013).

In summation, there appear to be inconsistencies among the expectations of administrators on professional duties of special education teachers. This may be a result of a lack of training on federal regulations surrounding the provision of special education, limited knowledge and experience of how to best educate students with disabilities, the over emphasis of standardized accountability system tracking progress and proficiency for all students, or a combination of all of the above. The daily demands for school administrators are overwhelming, but effective leadership is paramount to the overall success schools (Reeves, 2006).

### **Perceived Theory/Research to Practice Gap**

Special Education, like many professions, is not immune to the struggle between theory/research and practice. Across the country, special education preparation programs vary between traditional university programs and alternative licensure methods. Regardless of the type of professional program, there are basic tenets regarding what special educators study in preparation programs that guide the implementation of daily activities when performing in the field.

In an attempt to identify gaps between preparation and practice, Sakallı Gümüş (2015), conducted a qualitative case study to examine such discrepancies. Her findings revealed that special education teacher candidates express that traditional course work in combination with practicum experience corrected misconceptions they initially had about individuals with disabilities. Additionally, these special educators discovered that their

roles did not end when school is dismissed each day; rather, collaboration with families and outside agencies played a critical part in educating students with disabilities. Another key discovery from this research was that special educators found that the earlier in their preparation programs they had the opportunity to participate in practicums or field experiences, the better. Finally, the researcher discovered a difference between perceptions of practicing host teachers and teacher candidates in that both groups indicated a lack of overall resources for special education in general. New teacher candidates, however, describe a resistance by practicing teachers to explore creative ways to utilize available resources, as compared to practicing teachers attributing problems in the field to a lack of general knowledge about special education and poor parental support. Sakallı Gümüş (2015) concludes,

This study indicates that the difference between the way special education is practiced in the field and the way it is being taught in teacher preparation programs is huge and teacher candidates should be exposed to these realities earlier in the programs in a supported and controlled manner in order to increase the effectiveness of new teachers and decrease their disappointment. (p. 9)

In a different case study exploring a special education teacher's construction of knowledge as it related to coursework and retention in the field, Morewood and Condo (2012) examined aspects of pre-service preparation programs influencing teacher candidates' knowledge of teaching. These researchers found that the three most beneficial assignments performed in the participant's preparation program included the functional behavioral assessment, a strategies implementation project, and an action research project, all of which mirrored the model aligning conceptualizations of teacher knowledge defined

by Hanline's (2010) research on the importance of field experiences in inclusive settings. These researchers found that the more that teacher preparation programs provided rich practical experiences throughout the entire program, the more teacher candidates made the connection between theory and practice in the field.

There appears to be a distinct difference between what teachers are trained to do in their preparation programs and what they are expected to do when they secure a job in the field. Miretzky (2007) reviewed literature around the theory to practice gap and found that most practicing K-12 educators are resistant to research and theories from institutions of higher education because they do not see the relevancy to practice. Additionally she suggested that teacher candidates are exposed to very little research in their undergraduate programs. She suggested that more collaborative efforts between these educational entities is needed to break down these walls of resistance and that the institutions of higher education need to be more accepting of teacher-led research. If such assumptions are true, this could be a contributing factor in potential role confusion of secondary special educators.

### **Critique of the Literature**

The literature reviewed covers a variety of factors associated with the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers. This review exemplifies the entanglement of multiple influences on describing what it means to be a special educator. While many of the studies had elements related to the role of the secondary special educator serving students with mild or high incidence disabilities, none closely examined the negotiation of conflicting interests on how special educators perceive their role. Additionally, the review of literature did not reveal if and how special educators reconstruct their roles based on the

expectations of colleagues, supervisors, and/or policy changes. This analysis included research studies, reports, and research review articles. There were limited current research studies specific to this topic. Of the studies included, most were conducted in a very isolated region and were not generalizable beyond a particular locale. The research reviewed lacked explanation of why special education teachers perform their professional duties in the way that they do or how perceived roles impact their daily actions. The role of the secondary special educator serving students with mild disabilities is specific in nature and may explain why there are limited research studies. Yet, given the bleak outcomes for students with disabilities across this nation, more research is warranted to better understand how role perception impacts instruction.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Public education is an institution in the U.S. that is criticized, celebrated, and politicized by the varying constituents that it was established to serve. Many practices and research aimed at understanding and improving public education are situated within a positivistic framework, with a heavy emphasis on quantitative data and methodologies. Such research is valuable and adds to improved practices. However, there appear to be an increasing number of published qualitative studies that strive to highlight theories and frameworks that are more constructive in nature. Among those epistemologies is the social constructionist framework, which is a valuable tool for conducting research in education, as the purpose of social construction is to understand, which typically aligns with most educational goals. Educators and policy makers need to have a solid understanding of the various phenomena that occur within the field in order to effectively prepare future generations.

The theoretical framework of social construction has emerged in the social science field and attempts to work in tandem with science to help render understanding. According to Gergen (1985), the social constructionist movement attempts to move us beyond the duality between positivist and rationalist epistemology by offering a different way of understanding the interplay that social, cultural, historical, and institutional influences have on all the variables that contribute to science and research. Gergen breaks this down into four key principles or assumptions that include: the subjectivity of language, historical influences, socialization, and continual process of negotiation we employ to make meaning out of our world. Social constructionism does not recognize any absolute truths. Concerning research, Gergen warns, “constructionism offers no foundational rules of warrant and in this sense is relativistic, however, this does not mean ‘anything goes’” (p. 273).

The tenants of social constructionism guide my personal and professional epistemological views, particularly in the area of understanding special education programming. As a former special education teacher, current special education program administrator, and parent of an adolescent son with Autism Spectrum Disorder, I have experienced the continual interplay between my understanding of educating students with unique needs and the changing expectations of society regarding the operationalization of the public education institution. Through professional experience and research, I have discovered diverse philosophies and practices of special education teachers who typically serve students with high incidence disabilities at the high school level. Through my own teaching experience and administrative roles over the past two decades, I have observed a major shift in practice regarding how specially designed instruction is provided. The

academic expectations for students with disabilities is much more rigorous than it was two decades ago (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Upon crossing the threshold into high school, students with milder disabilities tend to receive accommodations and general content tutoring from special educators, with little to no direct intervention or strategies taught to address the specific skill deficits that are related to their qualifying disability (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Such a phenomenon has led me to question what is so special about special education for students with mild disabilities at the secondary level. When analyzing the evolution of special education legislation enacted in the early 1970s, research using a social constructionist lens may lead to better understanding of the shared meaning of special education, the historical and cultural influences that have shaped past and current practices, and how a process of continual negotiation between conflicting interests impact the expectations of these educators, which in turn, directly impact the outcomes for students. There have been relatively few substantive changes to IDEA since its inception; however, the variation in practice is vast. In other words, public schools must not only provide access to school for students with disabilities, but they must show development and provision of “an Individual Education Program (IEP) that is reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances” (*Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017*).

### **Implications for Further Research**

The role of the special educator is a widely debated topic as indicated in the review of literature. There are distinct philosophical differences about how to best educate students with disabilities, how to prepare and license special educators, the overall job expectations and duties of these teachers, and how to effectively supervise and evaluate those working in

the field. Such inconsistencies may be a contributing factor in the high turnover and burnout rate of special educators. Factors such as licensure differences among state educational agencies (SEAs) may always be a challenge, given the diverse political and ideological beliefs prevalent in this country. Therefore, the ability to perfectly streamline preparation programs and licensure requirements is limited. In addition, future research needs to take place in effective and accurate evaluation processes, which align with actual expectations of the special educator. Regardless of how teachers are licensed and evaluated, the way in which they perceive their professional roles shapes their daily interactions with students.

I propose that more research is needed in understanding the perceived roles of secondary special educators. Examining why special education teachers chose to teach students with disabilities, how these educators were trained and licensed, whether or not the daily duties reflect teacher expertise and an established job description, and how the expectations of all school stakeholders influence special education practice is among the particular areas of interest. Exploring these factors utilizing a social constructionist lens will promote better understanding of the professional role of these teachers within the field of special education.

## **Conclusion**

The educational institution is comprised of an array of complex and conflicting interests striving to prepare youth for the future. The goals continually change to try and keep up with the demands of a globalized society. Many aspects of the public education system reflect the traditions of the cultural past. This juxtaposed with the expectations of our current realities leads to possible role confusion for all educators. Throughout this

literature review, potential contributing factors to role confusion among special educators were examined, utilizing a social constructionist framework. Considering and comparing the historical, legal, cultural, philosophical, and practical influences that create and reshape meaning provide the basis for current and future practice. This topic is ripe with opportunity for future research.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

The demands from our society and educational institution placed upon special educators are extensive. Recruiting and retaining enough qualified special education teachers is a challenge shared by most public school districts. According to Billingsley's (2004) analysis of the shortage of special educators, role ambiguity and dissonance is a leading factor contributing to attrition rates across the country. Secondary special educators must balance the requirements of the regulations prescribed for educating students with disabilities, with the expectations of their school based administrators who may not have a background in special education, the overall pressures of dealing with adolescents in the school setting, and their own attitudes or beliefs regarding the education of students with diverse needs. These professionals may be expected to deviate from their teacher preparation training to negotiate such conflicting forces. The field of education is fertile ground for research inquiry. Drawing upon a social constructionist epistemology, perceived role expectations are subject to different philosophical beliefs about the best way to educate students with disabilities, including ontological views on inclusive practices. In addition, an educator's professional training and work experiences continually influence the construction of daily practices and interactions with colleagues. In this research there was a particular interest placed on the interplay between constructed meaning of acting secondary special educators, who predominantly serve students with high incidence or mild disabilities, and the internal and external influences that shape the everyday professional roles they exhibit. While this research was designed to provide rich information that can be used to better understand the perceived roles of special educators, it does not offer specific

solutions or promote activism, as that was not the purpose of study under a social constructionist model.

### **Research Questions**

Examining the perceived role expectations of secondary special education teachers was intended to identify commonalities and differences relating to perceived role expectations of all internal stakeholders (special educators, general educators, and administrators) and to serve as a basis for further study and guidance for enhancing future practice. The purpose of this study was to identify how these special education teachers construct meaning around their professional role of providing special education services in public schools located in one southeastern state. The guiding research question for this study was: What are the perceived roles of secondary special education teachers who serve students with high incidence disabilities and how do these educators' role perceptions contribute to their work practices and day-to-day work choices with students and fellow teachers? The sub-questions for this study follow:

1. How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?
2. To what or whom do secondary level special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?
3. How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and work practices to those learned in their educator preparation programs?
4. Is there a difference in how special educators define their own roles and how they perceive their colleagues to define their role in educating students with disabilities?

5. What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?

### **Research Design**

The research was executed using a qualitative multiple case study approach. A social constructionist epistemology paired well with a qualitative study. As Creswell (2014) asserts, “The qualitative researcher’s intent is to make sense of [or interpret] the meanings others have about their world” (p. 8). The fields of social science, including education, have contributed to the rise in the use of qualitative or interpretive studies since the late 1970s and have thus provided richer understandings of many topics important to the work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of how a specific group of special education teachers, those who teach students with mild or high incidence disabilities in the secondary setting, define their roles and go about making choices on how they do their work with students at the high school level.

Case study research is a prime choice for researchers seeking to “retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (Yin, 2014). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p.37). Qualitative research designs, such as case studies, can include a variety of data collection methods including survey items; open-ended interview questions; focus groups; document or artifact analysis; and observations. According to Creswell (2007), case study designs are useful when the researcher is seeking information about a phenomenon through analysis and interpretation of data gathered, while positioning his or her experiences throughout the process.

There are some challenges to conducting case study research. As identified by Creswell (2007), there is a balance between narrowing the focus of research to stay within the bounded system of the case and obtaining enough information about the case for a worthwhile contribution to the field. Likewise, Yin (2014) points out that single case study designs can be vulnerable to the field and lack the generalizability that multi-case designs can offer. It is important to understand that while multi-case designs may increase the studies reliability and generalizability, this form of case study research is more difficult to conduct by a novice and sole researcher (Yin, 2014).

A qualitative multiple case study design was selected based on the type of research questions posed and the desire to understand how educators make meaning of their perceived roles. For this study, I employed a combination of techniques to gather and analyze data to better understand what it means to be a secondary special educator and how differing meanings are constructed and negotiated, particularly as it relates to the perceived professional roles the selected teacher participants were expected to perform. Defined by the work of Hancock and Algozzine (2011), the cases in this research were bounded by a unit of analysis. For the purpose of this study the unit of analysis is a group of secondary special educators assigned to teach students with high incidence disabilities during the winter and spring of 2018, the period for which the research was conducted. This select group of special educators shared a common type of professional role, state standards, and state policies governing special education programs; yet this group accounted for multiple sizes of high schools and different regions, thus making cross-case data and themes richer in nature.

This exploratory study incorporated interviews from only secondary special educators teaching students identified with mild/high incidence disabilities from public high schools in this southeastern state. Exploratory designs are beneficial when the researcher wants to identify salient themes that participants view as important and how these themes may relate (Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011). Combining interview data with a review of documents or artifacts provided by these special educators helped in defining how they their professional roles, and how the background and experiences of these participants contributed to the understanding of how meaning is constructed.

**Participants.** For this research I chose the multiple case study approach in an effort to explore data from teachers from different regions and sizes of schools across one southeastern state. All six participants share similar teaching assignments. I explored how role perceptions and professional activities compared, and also looked for any potential differences. Given my current role as a special education director, I had easy access to fellow directors throughout the state. I began the participant selection process by identifying six traditional public school systems in one southeastern state, two school districts each from the eastern, central, and western parts of the state in an effort to include a variety of regions and school sizes. Inclusion of rural, suburban, and metropolitan/urban schools were part of the selection criteria. A letter containing the purpose of the study, along with a copy of the study proposal was first emailed to the special education directors of the six school districts selected, asking the director to assist me with navigating the research request process and to recommend potential teacher participants who met the study criteria.

The initial approval process with each school district began in late December 2017 and the final approval from the last district was not obtained until mid-March 2018. This process took much longer than anticipated, and required multiple email and phone call reminders. Once written approval was received from a school district, I began recruiting participants. In four out of the six cases, the Director of Exceptional Children provided the name and contact information of one teacher for me to recruit for the study. Each of the recommended participants agreed to participate in the study. In the other two cases, I was either given multiple names and email address or was told that I would need to select my own schools and staff to recruit. In each of these cases, I researched the webpages of several schools in the district and sent recruitment emails to multiple teachers. Fortunately, I had several responses from each district and selected the first responders from each to participate in the study.

Each of the six study participants was asked to select a pseudonym in order to provide anonymity. Each district is described by the location type (rural, suburban, urban) and geographical region (east, west, central) within the state. Information from each case is presented in the order for which the initial interviews were completed. In the following table (Table 1) is a display of participant and local education agency (LEA) information captured to summarize basic demographic data. See Table I.

Table 1

*Participant/LEA Data*

Participant	Gender/Race	Age Range	Highest Degree Earned/Discipline	LEA Description	Years of Experience
Mr. Allen	Male/ White	31-40	Master's in Learning Disabilities	Urban/ Central State	7
Mrs. Maddie	Female/ White	31-40	Master's in Special Education	Rural/ Southeast	16
Mrs. Walters	Female/ White	41-50	Master's in Reading Instruction	Suburban/ Northwest	13
Mrs. Black	Female/ Multiracial	31-40	Bachelor's in Special Education	Urban/ Southwest	9
Ms. Taylor	Female/ White	41-50	Master's in Special Education	Suburban/ East	18
Ms. Defeo	Female/ White	31-40	Master's in Special Education	Rural/ West	14

**Data collection.** The research data collection began with obtaining approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and appropriate review boards and superintendents of the selected participating school districts. Once consent was obtained, the researcher sought consent from identified participants and scheduled the initial interviews with all selected teachers who agreed to participate in the study. Data collection for this study consisted of gathering transcribed interview documents, researcher anecdotal notes made during and following each interview session, and job descriptions and narratives provided by each participant. Prior to the initial in-person interview, the researcher sent each participant the artifact protocol (Appendix F), which included directions for completing a brief narrative writing prompt asking participants to describe both a positive and negative professional experience relating to their perceived role. In addition to the narrative, the researcher asked that each participant to provide a written job description for their current role, a copy of their daily schedule, and any other documents or relevant artifacts that each participant felt represented her or his professional role or duties. Most artifacts were collected at the time of the initial interviews, with several being sent to the researcher after the interview. Open-ended structured interview questions were developed and piloted with a current secondary special educator, but was not included in the study. The pilot participant was able to critique the wording of the questions and helped the researcher gauge the timeframe of the initial interview session. I scheduled and conducted the initial interviews with the selected consenting participants at each individual teacher's school. The interview questions began with basic demographic information describing the participants' professional experience and training, which were on a separate sheet from the remaining open-ended questions. Participants were then asked to complete



the demographic information page and to select a pseudonym to be used in the final report. Next, the researcher posed more in-depth, open-ended questions around the perceived roles of special education teachers. These questions were designed to glean participants' thoughts and ideas on what it means to be a secondary special educator, how each define and operationalize the professional role, and what factors influence his or her perceptions and actions directly relating to performing the role. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. In addition to the transcribed interviews, the researcher took notes during and directly after each interview, noting informal observations about the professional setting where each participant performs his or her daily work routines.

**Data Sources.** Qualitative research is built upon a variety of rich data sources. These sources provide an in-depth look at a particular phenomenon. The triangulation of multiple sources of data strengthens the validity of the research being conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study sought to gather information from the following sources of data to better explore what it means to be a secondary special educator serving students with mild disabilities:

1. Job descriptions for secondary special educators serving students following the general curriculum;
2. Current resume detailing professional degrees, professional development, and experience provided by each participant;
3. Questions these teachers recall that were posed during the interview for their current positions and/or any recollection about the circumstances under which they were employed;
4. Participants daily work schedules;

5. Narrative essays from each participant describing situations that capture examples of both positive and negative experiences related to performing their perceived professional roles;
6. Interviews with current secondary special educators serving students with high incidence/mild disabilities, pursuing a high school diploma;
7. Informal observations of the professional environment captured during the in-person interview phase of the research.

The majority of data collected was through semi-structured interviews, utilizing open-ended questions. According to Seidman (2013), interview data is a gathering of people's stories; "telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (p. 7). Utilizing these data sources, the researcher wanted to obtain a multi-faceted view of factors that contribute to the shared meaning pool and generated questions for further inquiry.

***Interview protocol.*** Prior to the initial contact with each study participant, a letter of agreement from each school district was obtained. Next, initial participant agreement was sought and interview appointments scheduled. Information regarding the study, artifact request protocol, and participant consent forms were sent to each teacher to review prior to the scheduled interview. Sample copies of the participant consent request and LEA letter of agreement are included in the appendix. All participants were given the option to withdraw consent at any time during the study, without penalty. School district signed letter of agreements and signed participant consent forms were scanned and uploaded into the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) application program. Initial interviews were completed in person with each participant, at his or her work location. Each interview lasted between one to two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher

took detailed notes throughout all interviews. Following transcription, all audio-recordings were destroyed.

***Document/artifact/observational data analysis protocol.*** The analyses of the documents (job descriptions, schedules, resumes, and narrative descriptions) provided by each participant were included for the purpose of looking for similar themes across cases. Additionally, the themes identified were compared to the key elements and initial preparation standards of qualified special educators, set forth by CEC (2015). A listing of each standard and corresponding key elements can be found in Appendix H. General informal observational data was collected based on the work setting during the initial interviews conducted at each participant's place of employment.

**Data analysis.** Conducting a qualitative case study embraces a simultaneous process for gathering and analyzing research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I utilized an open coding system while conducting interviews, gathering and reviewing relevant documents, and reflecting on the research process. Given the limited number of cases (6) and that the data gathered in different formats (electronic, handwritten, etc), coding the data by hand was the best method. According to Creswell (2014), the use of coding to generate themes is useful in conducting case study research. Data was organized by both pre-established themes based on the research questions and themes that emerged during the research. Profiles of each case were developed along with cross-case analyses and themes.

Data from this study were analyzed and reported through a categorized system approach. The research questions served as the categories for analyzing and reporting out the data collected for each individual case. Themes that emerged from each case were

compared and contrasted in the cross case analysis. In conclusion, the data analyzed was linked back to the guiding research in the field. In the following table (Table 2) is the research protocol organizing the research questions with corresponding data sources to illustrate how the information from each data source was categorized, coded, and analyzed the information obtained.

Table 2

*Research Data Collection Protocol*

Research Question	Interview Questions	Other Data Sources
<p>What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?</p> <p>Participant and district demographics/background</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is your current position?</li> <li>▪ How many years of experience have you had in your current position?</li> <li>▪ What type of degree do you hold and in what field?</li> <li>▪ Through which type of method did you obtain your current teaching license (traditional, alternative, etc.)</li> <li>▪ How many years of classroom teaching experience in public schools do you have?</li> <li>▪ Do you have experience in public education outside of this state? If yes, where?</li> <li>▪ Describe your training and experience in your current position?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Current resume or list of professional training and experiences provided by each participant</li> <li>▪ District demographic information</li> <li>▪ Graduation Cohort data by school</li> </ul>
<p>How do secondary special education teachers of students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Describe your job or role as a special</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Job Descriptions provided by each</li> </ul>

with mild disabilities define their roles?

(Professional Role Description)

- education teacher?
- Describe what a typical school day looks like for you?
- What does it mean to be a special education teacher?
- What do you like most about your job?
- What do you like least about your job?
- What challenges do you face in your current position?
- Are you satisfied with your career choice? Why or why not?

- participant-compared to the CEC Standards & NC DPI EC Teacher Job Description
- General observation of each participant's professional setting/environment
- Participant Daily Work Schedules

To what or whom do special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?

(Role Construction)

- In a perfect world, describe what a typical day would look like for you as a secondary special educator?
- What would you change, if anything, about your professional role?
- IDEA states that students who are eligible for special education services must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and receive specially designed instruction. How do you define or operationalize specially designed instruction?

- Narrative Essays provided by each participant describing both a positive and negative professional experience in his or her current role-compared with CEC standards and job descriptions provided
- Participants Daily Work Schedules

How do secondary special education teachers compare

- Why did you choose

their current roles and practices at work to those learned in their educator preparation programs?

(Role Preparation & Development)

to teach special education at the high school level?

- How did your pre-service training prepare you for your current professional role? How so or why not? Are there aspects of your role that you weren't prepared for?
- What types of training or professional development have you received regarding the provision of special education services?

Is there a difference between how special educators define their roles as compared to how they perceive their colleagues to define their role in educating students with disabilities?

(Differing Role Perspectives)

- What do you believe your general education teacher colleagues perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?
- What do you believe your school administrator/supervisor or perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?
- Has your professional practice changed as a result of expectations of other colleagues or your supervisor? If so, please describe how.

- List of questions each participant recalls that was used in the interview for her or his current position
- General observation of each participant's professional setting/environment
- Participants Daily Work Schedules

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## Reliability

In order to promote reliable data collection and reporting, it is important to establish a detailed case study protocol that “maintains a chain of evidence” (Yin, 2014). For this multiple case study, I used a system of careful inspection of all interview transcripts,

documents collected, and field notes. Additionally, as suggested by Gibbs (2007), a professional colleague assisted with cross checking the coding of the data collected to establish inter-rater agreement. My colleague verified the themes generated in the cross-case analysis and we met twice upon her review of the research materials to discuss unique outliers related to the research findings.

### **Validity**

There are many steps a researcher must take when designing and conducting a study to promote valid findings (Creswell, 2014). Developing a data collection protocol that clearly aligns with the research questions was the first step in establishing internal validity for this study. The use of a protocol for data collection that establishes an iterative process within and across each case promoted credible findings. In addition, I shared aggregate data with participants to verify that the data collected authentically represent the preliminary results. None of the participants responded with questions or concerns from the summaries of the data captured and reported in the case-by-case analysis. According to Creswell (2007), it is important for the researcher to triangulate different sources of data and to encourage feedback from participants on the case analysis. Additionally, addressing the role of the researcher and any ethical considerations is important to the promotion of valid findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The next two sections address both the role of the researcher and ethical considerations.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am currently a special education director for a public school district in a suburban county district in the northwest region of this same southeastern state. For me, this experience provided rich insight into how public education institutions operate, are

organized, and the policies and practices that shape the daily actions of all stakeholders. In addition, as the researcher I acknowledge and account for my personal biases that could have influenced the data collection and analysis. According to Creswell (2014), it is important for the researcher to include information about experiences and interpretations directly relating to the topic of study. Qualitative studies do not strive for complete objectivity between the researcher and the subject; rather, the design incorporates such experiences and interpretations openly as part of the entire study process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

My professional and personal experiences have generated many questions leading up to this study. Over the past two decades, I have worked within the field of special education as a program director, school-based administrator, and a secondary special education teacher. In addition to my professional experience, I am the proud parent of an eighteen-year-old son who has high functioning Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Throughout my professional and personal experiences within the field of special education, I have witnessed many changes in practice as it relates to the provision of special education services. My own beliefs and views have been shaped by experience, social expectations and demands, acquisition of new learning, and the continual changes within our society. I have had the privilege of working with a variety of different colleagues and stakeholders, who exhibit diverse beliefs and attitudes. Within this research, I sought to understand the meanings that others make with regard to providing special education services. I was charged with gathering, analyzing, and reporting what is revealed through the research and acknowledging my own biases as it interplayed with the entire process.



## **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

The data collection for this study involved the collection of artifacts and direct interviews with participants. As mentioned earlier, each participant selected a pseudonym and each school was described by its community type (rural, suburban, or urban) and by the geographical location in the state (east, west, or central) throughout all research written reports. There was little risk to breach of confidentiality or anonymity. All research data and materials will be kept in a personal secure and locked location for up to five years from the final date of the dissertation report.

## **Ethical Issues**

I am currently serving as a special education director for a medium sized school district in the northwestern part of the same state from which the research was conducted. This study does not include any participants, documents, or data associated with any school district for which I have been employed. In an effort to eliminate any conflicts of interest, I sought out participants who have no prior professional or personal relationship with me. The background and experience of the researcher raises some concern with regard to bias. Throughout the research process I focused on maintaining objectivity in the data collection and analysis process.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

This multiple case study research was designed to gain an understanding of the perspectives high school special education teachers have about their professional roles as educators who serve a similar population of students with disabilities. These cases are bounded by types of students served, the focus on each participant's view of his or her professional role, location of schools in one state, and period in time the investigation was

conducted. These facts delimit generalizability to the broader population of special educators. According to Torrance (2010), there are two criticisms of case study research, one is that it is impossible to generalize from a small number of cases to the population under study and the second is determining where to draw the boundaries, or what to include and what to leave out. While some may view this type of research as too restrictive, the purpose of this research is not to generalize, but rather to provide a deeper understanding about these bounded cases and contribute to the pool of knowledge related to the profession of special educators and their roles in schools.

### **Conclusion**

The scope of this study focused on the perceptions of a group of special educators who serve similar types of students with disabilities. This multiple case study approach gathered rich descriptions of role perceptions provided by these six participants. In the next chapter, I will share the results of each individual case and analyze the results across all six cases examining common themes shared by all participants. Additionally, any unique themes will be highlighted.

## Chapter Four

### Results

This chapter presents contextual information and findings from data sources associated with the case studies. Each case begins with introductory contextual information focused on the participant, the associated school and local education agency (LEA). This introduction is followed by information gathered from the following data sources: the interview, resume, daily schedule, job descriptions, and teacher narrative. Included is each participant's professional role description, factors contributing to the role, along with vocational preparation and on-going professional development. Each case concludes with the participant's perception of how colleagues, such as general education teachers and administrators, view the special educator's role. For reference, a list of participant and school district demographic information is provided in Table 1. The Research Data Collection Protocol is available in Appendix I.

Also, in this chapter, following the descriptions of each case and associated data, is a cross-case analysis that reveals common themes that emerged from an analysis of individual case studies. Additionally, a significant, unique finding that emerged from one case is presented. Finally, I discuss the graduation cohort data for students with disabilities for each school as an aspect of the local education agency (LEA) demographic data. While this research study does not imply any correlation or connection to graduation cohort outcomes, these data are, nonetheless, informative of the contexts within which these teachers work and, therefore, are included in the case studies.

#### **Presentation of Case I: Mr. Allen**

**Participant and LEA context.** Mr. Allen is a white male between the ages of 31 and 40. He obtained his special education certification through the traditional teacher

education degree and licensure method. He holds a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree in learning disabilities; each from a different accredited state university. He has been a special education teacher for seven years, all served in his current school. Mr. Allen reported that he has approximately 35 students on his caseload and that he is responsible for providing direct services for students for whom he drafts IEP goals. He describes his position as that of an Inclusion Teacher, and based on his daily schedule and interview responses, his typical day is spent co-teaching Math I classes, with the exception of his first period block, a study skills class where he delivers strategy instruction to some of the students from his caseload in a mobile unit classroom. Mr. Allen is one of eight special education teachers who provide direct services to students with disabilities. The school also employs two full-time special education case managers who assist the department with scheduling meetings, placing students, assigning staff, and completing most special education paperwork for the school's eight special education teachers.

Mr. Allen's school serves approximately 2000 students total. Of these students, approximately 250 are eligible for special education services. The school is part of an urban community located in the central part of the state. According to 2016-17 graduation cohort data, published by the state department of public instruction, the overall percent of high school students graduating within four years was 90.2% for all students and 88.9% for students with disabilities.

**Participant description of professional role.** With respect to his job description, daily schedule, and duties, Mr. Allen provided his daily work schedule and a brief, self-created job description. He describes his job as, "to teach students, with and without learning disabilities, other health impairments, and various other disabilities as stated in the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.” Although several attempts were made to obtain a formal job description from the district, these attempts were unsuccessful. A review of his daily schedule revealed that the school follows a four-period matrix where students have four 90-minute class periods each semester.

In describing his day in detail, Mr. Allen reported arriving approximately 30 minutes before the start of first period. During this time, he prepares for the school day by making copies and organizing plans for his first period lesson. This semester, Mr. Allen’s first period study skills class focused on academic skills and various learning strategies that pertain to note taking, reading, writing, and post-secondary transition. This class is located in a mobile unit shared with another special education teacher. These students with disabilities receive elective credit. Mr. Allen states that while this class is intended to be a small group, there are 12 students, making it difficult to focus on the one-to-one instruction that some students require.

During the remainder of the day, Mr. Allen co-teaches Math I classes. Sixty-two percent of the students in the second period class are students with disabilities, 80% of the students who attend his third period class have identified disabilities. During fourth period, Mr. Allen’s planning block, he write IEPs, pull students for progress monitoring associated with IEP goals, attends IEP team meetings, makes copies, and collaborates with co-teachers to plan lessons. Mr. Allen stated that he has a 25-minute duty free lunch each day and typically spends 20 minutes after school preparing for the next day, collaborating with other teachers, or working on lesson plans.

Regarding his special education case management and paperwork duties, Mr. Allen reported that special education teachers are responsible for progress monitoring and

reporting for students on their caseloads. While there are two full-time certified special education teachers, called case managers, who work with special education teachers, Mr. Allen is responsible for the development of individual levels of performance and IEP goal development of students assigned to his caseload of 35 students. Mr. Allen indicated that he likes having case managers who can process the majority of the paperwork associated with triennial reevaluations and take care of the logistics of scheduling meetings.

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Mr. Allen stated that special educators must be patient with students, other teachers, family members, administration, and other colleagues. He emphasized the need to be flexible as he does not see special educators has having a clearly defined role, but rather a fluid role that changes based on many factors. He also stated that teaching students was what he liked most about his job, while paperwork with the increased focus on documentation is what he liked least. He indicated that his biggest challenge is the lack of time to do everything that is expected. He stated that he does not stress or worry about this lack of time, rather he does what he can while at work and strives to maintain a healthy professional and personal life balance. When asked if he was satisfied with his career choice, Mr. Allen answered emphatically that he is satisfied and said that like with all professions there are frustrations, but those are overshadowed by the successes.

Mr. Allen describes his current duties and responsibilities as “pretty close to perfect.” He mentioned throughout the interview, and in the written narrative response, his desire for directly teaching students, primarily in content areas such as Math I and Biology. When asked how he operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, he describes it as “instruction on a student’s level that is differentiated and

blended into the core content.” He went on to emphasize the importance of working on transition goals that are designed to help students succeed with life goals.

When providing suggestions about professional role modifications, Mr. Allen identified two main areas for change: (1) greater respect for the role of special educators and (2) the need to hire for more special education teachers. He spoke about greater respect when he described this experience that did not align with his perceived professional role. Due to the absence of a one-on-one assistant, he was pulled out of his inclusion class to assist a male student with a basic daily living need. He stated that he was more than happy to help the student, but he felt “extremely undervalued as a teacher” in the situation. Specifically he shared, “I felt as if my current role as a co-teacher was not important and I felt undervalued as a professional as I was told, and not asked, to undertake this responsibility.” Mr. Allen said that he felt undervalued because it would be highly unlikely that such a request would be made of a general education teacher. With respect to his desire for more special education teachers, Mr. Allen said he would like to see reduced caseloads and, thus, have more time to address the individual needs of students.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** Mr. Allen reported a number of experiences that influenced his choice to become a special educator and that influenced how he currently defines that role. His first influence came from his parents, both teachers. In high school, he joined a teacher cadet program and this experience increased his interest in becoming a teacher. When he went to college he initially majored in Psychology, but found it to be very difficult. While in college he took a developmental-level course that sparked his interest in developmental disabilities, due to his own experience and childhood diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The developmental course helped him

learn more about himself as a learner. Recognizing his interest, his parents encouraged him to consider the field of special education. Given the high demand for teachers, Mr. Allen quickly changed his major.

When reflecting on his teacher preparation programs, Mr. Allen states that his programs prepared him “the best that they could.” He said his programs were strong in helping him understand the important historical and legal foundations of IDEA, teaching him about the components of how to write IEPs, and learning the most current and common methodologies associated with teaching students with disabilities. He went on to say that his teacher preparation program provided limited core content knowledge. Mr. Allen shared that his programs did not adequately prepare him to build productive relationships with young people or to converse with and effectively collaborate with all school stakeholders.

Since he has been on the job, Mr. Allen has received on-going professional development, primarily offered by the school district’s central office special education department. Training on such topics as post-secondary transition programs (FAST) aimed at at-risk youth, assistive technology, instructional technology, Core Reading Assessment, various compliance trainings for high school special educators, and new instructional strategies have been provided. Additionally, Mr. Allen has received training in several research-based programs, including Reading and Math Foundations and Orton-Gillingham Reading Intervention. Mr. Allen went on to say that while these professional development opportunities were good, he felt that they really did not address the needs of inclusion teachers. As mentioned earlier, he has been serving in the inclusive environment and co-



teaching for most of the instructional day over the past four years, but has never received formal co-teaching training.

**Perceptions about how other colleagues view the special educator role.**

Concerning general education teachers, Mr. Allen shared that he feels his general education colleagues expect him to teach like they do. He said some of these teachers see the benefit of inclusion based on the positive experiences they have had while others do not. He describes most teachers as a “territorial breed” in that they want to control their space and instruction. Currently he feels he has good working relationship with his co-teachers and they let him actively participate in the instructional process and planning. In the past, he has had very negative experiences where he was treated like an assistant and expected to just lean up against the filing cabinet and not interact with students in the class.

Regarding school administrators, Mr. Allen shared that his current administrators are very supportive. He states that they expect him to spend the majority of his day teaching kids. They understand that his role must be flexible and will often change. The administration has been integral in helping special educators schedule students and create inclusions schedules with teachers who are more accepting of inclusion services. Mr. Allen did not elaborate on how the administration deals with less willing or cooperative staff. In summary, Mr. Allen’s administrators expect him to come to school and do his job. When asked if his professional practice has changed as a result of expectations held by other colleagues, Mr. Allen quickly answered, “No, everything I do is evidence or research-based approaches and methods.” He said he has an open dialogue with his supervisors and colleagues and he changes his teaching based on what he has tried and deemed successful. It is important to note, however, that Mr. Allen is not provided a private space or his

planning period. Instead, I observed him sharing a space with two other staff members and approximately 12 students.

Mr. Allen could not recall the interview questions that he was asked during his employment interview. He described his interview process as very informal. In addition, he could not recall questions currently used by the administration, nor was he able to obtain question for positions similar to his.

### **Presentation of Case II: Mrs. Maddie**

**Participant and LEA context.** Mrs. Maddie is a white female between the ages of 31 and 40. She obtained her special education certification through the traditional method and holds a bachelor's degree in special education from an institution of higher education (IHE) in Pennsylvania and a master's degree in special education curriculum and instruction, with a concentration in low-incidence disabilities from a state university. She has been a special education teacher for 16 years total, eight of which she has served in her current school. Mrs. Maddie reported that she has approximately 30 students on her caseload and stated that the position she currently holds is as the lead exceptional children's (EC) teacher. She defines her current position as one in which she teaches half of the day and spends the other half planning and coordinating services for the entire special education department. Mrs. Maddie is one of 12 special education teachers providing direct services to students. Special education teachers at her school are responsible for providing direct services and for all the paperwork associated with students on their caseloads.

Mrs. Maddie's school serves approximately 1900 students and approximately 240 identified for special education services. The school is part of a rural community located in the eastern part of the state. According to a state department of public instruction 2016-17

report, the published graduation cohort data indicates that the percentage of students who graduated in four years to be 93.7% for all students, and 76.0% for students with disabilities.

**Participant description of professional role.** Mrs. Maddie provided her daily work schedule and a generic teacher job description that came from her district's central office. This district job description was for all teachers and did not provide differentiated questions specific to expectations or duties of special education teachers. When asked to describe her job, Mrs. Maddie stated that she holds a dual role as the exceptional children's department chair and occupational course of study (OCS) inclusion teacher. She said that she feels like all she does is paperwork.

Regarding her daily schedule and duties, Mrs. Maddie reports that after morning arrival she typically has to find coverage for special education teachers who are absent. This semester, Mrs. Maddie spent most of first period working on paperwork. For second and third periods, Mrs. Maddie reported that she co-taught inclusion American History II and inclusion English IV respectively. Fourth period was Mrs. Maddie's planning block, which she described as her time to write IEPs, attend IEP team meetings, complete required reports, and make copies. Mrs. Maddie stated that her school has a Smart Lunch hour when she sometimes spends part of the time performing various duties like providing tutorials, and participating in Professional Learning Groups (PLCs). She is expected to incorporate her lunch break into these activities. Several days per week, Mrs. Maddie said that she worked after school conducting mentor/mentee teacher meetings or attending department or faculty meetings.

With regard to special education case management and paperwork duties, Mrs. Maddie reported that special education teachers are responsible for progress monitoring and reporting, and the development of all IEPs for students on their caseloads. As the department chair, Mrs. Maddie reported that she is responsible for all the initial referral/evaluation, triennial reevaluations, and any out of state transfers. She also schedules and attends most IEP team meetings. The school district provides some intermittent support from program specialists assigned to multiple schools, but Mrs. Maddie describes these staff members as “supportive, but spread too thin.”

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Mrs. Maddie stated that it means to go above and beyond to help students learn. She said that special educators try to figure out how to teach students with disabilities. She stated that working with kids was what she liked most about her job while dealing with adults that do not follow directions is what she liked least. In her narrative response, Mrs. Maddie wrote, “The ability to help young adults see their dreams begin to come true or assist them in taking the first steps onto the future paths is what it means to be a secondary special education teacher.” She indicated that her biggest challenges are the lack of enough district support personnel and the constant special education teacher turnover. She is responsible for training two to three new special education teachers each year. When asked if she was satisfied with her career choice, Mrs. Maddie answered she was satisfied because she loves kids; however, she does not like the paperwork which she blames as a cause of teacher turnover.

When asked about a description of her own job, Mrs. Maddie reports that her typical day in a perfect world as being able to just do one of her two roles, either teaching

students all day or just doing the paperwork and administrative aspects. She states that it is very hard to do both well. In her professional narrative, Mrs. Maddie provided a story describing a situation where a student, who was following the occupational course of study (OCS) and dreamed of going to community college, was accepted to college due to the support and assistance she and his mother provided. She described this experience as one that aligns positively with her perception of her role. When asked about how she operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, she explained it as doing something differently and presenting materials in a different way. She went on to state that goals should not be presented in the same way as those for non-disabled students. She believes in high expectations but cautions against over emphasis on the same content standards for all students.

Mrs. Maddie shared information about how her professional role should be modified. In her narrative describing a professional experience that did not align with her perceived role, she included being asked to supervise groups of students or cover classes when she was supposed to be working with her inclusion classes. She stated that she understands the importance of being a team player, she feels that those who ask her to substitute, do not deem her typical responsibilities to be as important as covering another class or group. Additionally, when asked what she would change about her professional role, she stated she would like more time to work with students in small groups.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** When asked about role preparation, Mrs. Maddie reported entering the field through a traditional teacher preparation program. When reflecting on her teacher education preparation program, Mrs. Maddie stated that her courses did not adequately prepare her for the job she is currently doing. She said that her

undergraduate experience provided knowledge about different disabilities and how students learn; however this program failed to adequately prepare her to work with various colleagues and difficult parents. With regard to the paperwork processes and compliance aspects of the job, Mrs. Maddie revealed that her program did not prepare her for the job.

Since she has been on the job, Mrs. Maddie has received on-going professional development primarily offered by her district's central office special education department. Mrs. Maddie stated that her district used to provide monthly seminars on compliance related topics to all EC teachers. Mrs. Maddie shared that high school teachers have repeatedly asked for more training specific to assessments, strategies, and interventions for high school students, and have been told that there are none available for this level.

**Perceptions of how other colleagues view the special educator role.** Mrs. Maddie shared that some of her general education colleagues were wonderful and supportive of inclusion and wanted to co-teach. In these classrooms, special education teachers are equals and are able to work with all kids. Teacher pairs often divide up activities to teach while other general education teachers view special educators as assistants and want them to make copies. Mrs. Maddie says that she believes these general education teachers to have control issues and not to be collaborative or inviting.

Mrs. Maddie shared that her current school administrators are very supportive. She said that the assistant principal, to whom the special education department is assigned, allows the special educators to figure out what is best with regard to scheduling and services. She quoted this administrator as saying, "Do what is best for students, even if it is not convenient for the adults [meaning teachers]." Mrs. Maddie believes that this administrator's attitude and support come from her previous experience working with

state's department of instruction and from having adopted a more global view of education. When asked if her professional practice has changed as a result of expectations perceived or expressed by other colleagues, Mrs. Maddie stated that she came into this profession to work with kids and she does that, but not at the same level she would prefer. She stated that her supervisors and colleagues expect a lot more from her because she is the EC department chair/lead EC teacher. She says, "Paperwork has taken over my life, and they just expect me to do more."

The administration provides Mrs. Maddie with a large conference room located off of the media center. She has plenty of room to store materials and files associated with special education paperwork. She has a desk area and separate table to work with students during lunch tutorials. This space is also located near the main office.

I wanted to review interview questions that the school administration recalled or currently used when hiring teachers for the same role, but Mrs. Maddie stated that her administrator could not recall specific questions used for special education interviews. Mrs. Maddie transferred within her county to different schools and positions, but was not formally interviewed when she returned to her current position. She remembered her initial interview process as very informal and not able to recall specific questions.

### **Presentation of Case III: Mrs. Walter**

**Participant and LEA context.** Mrs. Walters is a white female between the ages of 41 and 50. She obtained her special education certification through the traditional method, and holds a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree in reading instruction, both from a state university. She has been a special education teacher for 13 years total, eight years of which have been in her current school. Mrs. Walters reported that

she has approximately 20 students on her caseload and also states that her current position title is EC Secondary Teacher. In addition to being licensed as a special education teacher, she took the Praxis licensure exam and holds a license for secondary English. Based on her daily schedule and interview responses, her typical day is spent teaching a reading intervention program three out of four blocks per day. The reading program serves both general education and special education students who receive either an elective course credit or English I credit at the end of second semester. Mrs. Walter's school also supports daily general education content area tutorial sessions for students on her caseload. Mrs. Walters is one of seven special education teachers providing direct services to students; these teachers are responsible for providing direct service and completing all associated paperwork.

Mrs. Walter's school serves approximately 900 students, with about 130 students eligible for special education services. Her school is part of a suburban community located in the northwestern part of this state. According the graduation cohort data, published by this states department of public instruction, at the end of the 2016-17 school year, the percentage of students who graduate within four years is 93.1% for all students and 85.7% of students with disabilities.

**Participant description of professional role.** Mrs. Walters provided her daily work schedule and a district generated EC classroom teacher job description. This district job description was for all special education teachers and did differentiate grade level or curriculum type (adapted or general curriculum). When asked to describe her job, Mrs. Walters stated that she is an EC secondary teacher who prepares students for life outside of



high school. To do this she must help them improve their reading and job skills so that they can advocate for themselves and live independently after graduation.

Mrs. Walters teaches a reading intervention program with yearlong English I curriculum during first, second, and third periods each day. Additionally, she reported that she has approximately 50-minute lunch/tutorial time when students come to her if they need extra help in their classes. Several years ago her district paid for her to take the secondary English praxis, which gave her licensure to teach secondary English. The students assigned to her classes are a mixture of general education students and students with disabilities. The grouping for each class is based on Lexile reading levels and IEP service delivery specification. At the end of the year, students receive one elective credit and an English I credit. Mrs. Walters has planning during the last period. During this time she completes paperwork, lesson plans, attends professional learning committee (PLC) meetings, and participates in IEP team meetings. Occasionally, during emergency situations, she completes paperwork during her instructional blocks.

Referencing special education case management and paperwork, Mrs. Walters revealed that the school district provided compliance support and monitoring from a program specialist, but there is no position dedicated just to completing paperwork. It is the expectation that all special education teachers manage paperwork for students assigned to their caseloads. Currently, Mrs. Walters has approximately 20 students on her caseload, but does not directly serve all of those students. At her school, the EC department chair has only one to two periods a day assigned to work with students and uses the other two periods to assist with managerial responsibilities within the entire special education program at the school.

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Mrs. Walters said that many special education teachers are focused on standards and proficiency as summative assessments; however, she is driven by individual progress and how far her instruction can take students. She reported, “My focus is on real-world outcomes, not just passing a test.” She stated that working with students and establishing relationships with students and their families was what she liked most about her job; she liked paperwork least. In her written narrative, she detailed the substantial reading growth that one of her students experienced last year. This not only improved his performance in classes but also boosted his self-esteem and changed his projected course of study from OCS to Future Ready Core.

Mrs. Walters shared several challenges she faces in her professional role. First, the paperwork demands interfere with instructional time. The next challenge related to the mindset that some students have regarding special education services; they do not think they need the extra support and do not want to participate in intervention classes. Additionally, Mrs. Walters reported the high school block schedule structure makes it difficult to provide individualized instruction. When asked if she was satisfied with her career choice, Mrs. Walters related that she was and that she thrives to make a difference in the lives of her students.

Mrs. Walters described a typical day in her perfect world as teaching three out of four periods with no interruptions. She went on to say that having a period that was devoted solely to planning would be an added benefit. When asked how she operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, she stated that she offered what the general education teacher cannot. This includes bringing a variety of strategies to meet

student needs. In her current role she is responsible for identifying struggling readers at entry to high school and for providing reading intervention.

Mrs. Walters also shared aspects of the professional role that she believes need to be changed. In her written narrative describing a professional experience that did not align with her perceived role, she stated that acting, as the “protector” for students is not something she believes should be part of a special educators role. She was referring to heightened emphasis on school safety and active shooter drills. She reported that she did not go into education to have to protect students from the type of violence we are seeing in schools today. Additionally, when asked what she would change about the professional role, Mrs. Walters replied that the paperwork demands needed to be reduced and also more meaningful. She further explained that her job was made difficult by frequent process and paperwork expectation changes.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** Mrs. Walters entered the field through a traditional teacher preparation model. When reflecting on her teacher education preparation program, Mrs. Walters stated that her programs did the best it could to prepare pre-service teachers for special education work. She related that she learned most of the skills required to effectively teach once she was on the job. Her undergraduate work was focused on theory and explained that real work experiences were the most beneficial for her.

While on the job, Mrs. Walters has received on-going professional development primarily offered by her district’s central office special education department. Mrs. Walters revealed that her district provided monthly trainings on areas of compliance deemed weak by internal and external audit data. This year the focus of these compliance trainings are on

writing to better represent levels of performance in student IEPs. Additionally, Mrs. Walters shared that she has been trained and continues to receive training in reading interventions; however, she does not feel that type of training should be considered specific to special education. She sees reading and literacy professional development as something that all educators need.

**Perceptions about how other colleagues view the special educator role.** Mrs. Walters shared that some of her general education colleagues view special education teachers as having an easier job, given the small number of students they serve. She reports that many of these peers expect her to provide all the accommodations required in the general education setting, to contact parents when there are issues, and to basically assist students with the general education content. Mrs. Walters explained that many of these teachers view students with disabilities as the sole responsibility of the special education teachers. This belief, she felt, lessened the overall student responsibility for the general educators. Mrs. Walters said that not all general education teachers feel this way; however, many in her school hold this belief.

Mrs. Walters feels sincerely respected by her school administrators. She stated that they expect the special educators not only to collaborate with their general education colleagues, but also to offer to teach general education teachers strategies to help struggling learners. She perceives that her administrators view the special education teachers as experts with regard to educating students with disabilities. The administrators in her school spend a lot of time in the special educators classrooms and always include them in school events. Mrs. Walters believes that her administrators know that if they support the special education staff, they will get more out of them, which in turn will improve the success of

students with disabilities. When asked if her professional practice has changed as a result of expectation of other colleagues, Mrs. Walters responded that her practices have not changed based on the expectations of her general education peers because following their expectations would have a negative impact on her own performance and the service students receive. She did state that administrative support received over the past six years has improved her practice by allowing her to teach what is appropriate for her students, i.e., providing reading intervention.

The administration provides Mrs. Walters a regular size classroom that is on a hallway with various general education classrooms. Her work space contains much literacy rich visuals throughout the classroom with many posted on the walls. Mrs. Walters does not share her space, which contains resources supportive of reading intervention and the English curriculum.

School administrators did not formally interview Mrs. Walters for her current position because she transferred from a middle school in the district. Her last formal interview was more than nine years ago, and she could not recall the questions she was asked. She did provide the current *EC Teacher Interview Tool* currently used at her school. Upon review of this interview tool, there were only seven questions posed to potential candidates, none of which were specific to special education instructional approaches, processes and procedures, or collaboration.

#### **Presentation of Case IV: Mrs. Black**

**Participant and LEA context.** Mrs. Black is a multi-racial female between the ages of 31 and 40. She obtained her special education certification through the traditional teacher preparation program, and holds a bachelor's degree in special education from a

state university. She has been a special education teacher for nine years, three years of which have been in her current school. Mrs. Black reported that she has approximately 28 students on her caseload and that her current position in the school is an EC teacher and EC department chair. Based on her daily schedule and interview responses, her typical day is spent providing a combination of academic support elective credit to some special education students pursuing the future ready core diploma, while also co-teaching at least one occupational course of study (OCS) virtual public school (VPS) class, three out of four periods per day. Additionally, during three out of four blocks, she provided course delivery for one homebound student who follows the extended content standards. Mrs. Black occasionally provides individualized tutoring to students on her caseload on occasion during her planning period and before and after school hours as well.

Mrs. Black's school is part of an urban community located in the southwestern part of the state. The school serves approximately 1200 students, and 82 students who are eligible for special education services. According the graduation cohort data, published at the end of the 2016-17 school year by the state's department of public instruction, the percentage of students who graduated within four years was greater than 95% overall, and 93.8% of students with disabilities. Mrs. Black describes the school as a traditional high school in a tight-knit, affluent community, with heavy parental involvement. School athletics is a large part of this school community. Mrs. Black shared that many of the teachers have been at this high school for most of their careers and are typically from this community. She described both the school and community as less than welcoming to outsiders, for both students and staff.

Mrs. Black is one of three special education teachers providing direct services to students. At the time of this study, the school had a total of 82 eligible students who were receiving special education services, approximately 62 are following the future ready core course of study (FR), 20 following the occupational course of study (OCS), and two are accessing the extended content standards or adapted curriculum (AC). Mrs. Black stated that there are no students who receive co-teaching services in the general education classroom. All direct special education instruction is provided to students in the special education classroom, regardless of graduation pathway. She did note that most general education teachers do provide classroom accommodations as outlined in students' IEPs but will often send students with disabilities to the special education classroom for testing accommodations. Special education teachers at the school are responsible for providing direct services and completing most of the paperwork associated with students on their caseloads. Additionally, she shared that the district provides a compliance lead teacher one day per week to assist with paperwork, initial referrals, and manifestation determination reviews.

**Participant description of the professional role.** Mrs. Black provided a district generated EC teacher- general curriculum job description. When asked to describe her job, Mrs. Black began by describing how other staff in her school view EC teachers. I then redirected her to respond with how she described her role and she stated that she is an EC general and adapted curriculum teacher, as well as the EC department chair for her school. She described her role as one in which she prepares students with disabilities for life after high school, regardless of the student's post-secondary goals. She went on to say that her

role was “not necessarily teaching them [students with disabilities] basic skills.” She added that she feels like all she does is paperwork.

Mrs. Black provided more daily detail, noting that she arrives 45 minutes before first period. Every third week she has cafeteria duty, which involves supervision for students arriving before the start of the instructional day. When she is not on duty, she provides before school tutoring. She also noted that she stays one hour beyond the end of the instructional day. If she is not involved in staff, department, or IEP team meetings, she tutors students. Mrs. Black shared that she has coached women’s soccer in the past, but due to some recent medical issues she has not been able to coach this school year.

Mrs. Black’s schedule for the semester indicated that during first period, she provided academic support to nine students who follow the future ready core course of study (FR), co-taught OCS English I with a virtual public school (VPS) teacher to four students who were following the occupational course of study (OCS), and taught English I extended content to a student who came in a few days a week, based on current placement on the homebound continuum, and followed the adapted curriculum course of study (AC). During second period, Mrs. Black provided academic support to six students, credit recovery for one student in a foundation of math online course, and American History I extended content to an AC homebound continuum student. Mrs. Black noted that during the first and second period blocks she had one peer tutor who served as a teacher assistant intern. This tutor is a high school student without disabilities who receives elective credit. For third period, Mrs. Black served nine students for academic support and one AC homebound student for life science extended content. When asked to describe her role in teaching academic support groups during each of her instructional blocks, she indicated



that she provided students with skill practice worksheets that aligned with the goals prescribed in their IEPs, and she, as well used this time to help them with their general education classwork and homework. Mrs. Black's planning period occurred during fourth period. She described her planning period as a time to plan, do paperwork, occasionally provide staff trainings and provide homebound instruction to two students on the homebound continuum.

Mrs. Black is a licensed exceptional children's (EC) teacher in both the adapted and general curriculum. Her schedule revealed that she provided instruction to a range of students with mild to more severe disabilities. Since she also served as the department chair, she had the responsibility of mentoring her special education colleagues, preparing for and facilitating special education department meetings and scheduling for special education staff and students. She noted that she collaborates frequently with colleagues and school administration to advocate for students with disabilities and in support of new special education staff at the school.

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Mrs. Black stated that in addition to paperwork, "Special education teachers really connect with students and build positive relationships." She reported that special educators spend their time trying to get students ready for life after high school. She shared that watching students finally grasp a concept they have been struggling with and the students' gratitude for help provided is what she likes most about her job. When asked about what she likes least about her role she listed the following: (1) the expectation to provide daily living support, (2) to serve on crisis teams, (3) to deal with a volume of constantly changing paperwork requirements, and (4) to monitor IEP goal progress in a software system.

Mrs. Black stated that her biggest challenge is the lack of time to correctly do all the things she is expected to do. Another challenge is trying to reach students who have significant behavioral needs or who are depressed. She, as a member on the school's crisis team, was often involved with students who exhibited severe aggressive behaviors. It was also evident after looking over her schedule, reviewing her interview responses, and reviewing my informal observations during her planning period, that students with disabilities often seek her out for general education assistance and test accommodations. When asked if she was satisfied with her career choice, Mrs. Black said, "Yes and no." She explained that she loved working with high school students, but she does not like the political issues in the education setting, the constant changes in the practice, the compensation offered to public educators in the state, and the necessity of dealing with noisy, overbearing or difficult parents who try to tell her how to do her job.

Mrs. Black envisions a typical day in a perfect world, as being able to just serve a common group of students during each class period. For example, she would like to only have students in one OCS course during a period and not have additional academic support students at the same time. Another aspect of the job she described as ideal would be to have the opportunity to focus exclusively on each student's skill needs. She goes on to list the desire to have someone else do all the paperwork associated with special education and not have to deal with discipline as part of her role. Finally, she stated that it would be nice if general education teachers would seek her out once in while as opposed to her always going to them. In her written narrative response describing a situation where she felt she was fully performing her perceived role, Mrs. Black shared how she worked one on one with an incoming, struggling freshman to assess her needs, collect current data, and help

guide an IEP team to change the student's goals, services, and course of study. This process allowed the student to excel.

When asked how she operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, she initially stated that her district office special education department defines what special education teachers are supposed to do. When I redirected her to share how she would operationalize specially designed instruction, she states that special educators must advocate for appropriate placements on the continuum, be able to explain the various types of disabilities, schedule academic support classes, read passages one on one with students and help them find context clues, discuss study skills with students, check in with students periodically, and advocate for students when needed. Mrs. Black also mentioned knowing and implementing strategies to address various student needs such as anxiety.

Mrs. Black shared several things about the professional role that she believes need to be changed. First, she recognizes that paperwork is inevitable in this profession, but does believe that it could be reduced or consolidated to decrease the overall burden. Next, she feels that there are far too many changes that are constantly imposed on special education teachers as a result of legal "what ifs." Another change she suggests is to improve communication in the school setting between all stakeholders. Additionally, she feels that more guidance from the district and school administration is needed with regard to what special educators are expected to do. As cited in her narrative response, Mrs. Black feels that she is expected to do so much more than a teacher should be expected to do. Students at the high school level come to her for serious problems in their home lives or with boyfriend/girlfriend issues and she explains that she often feels like she is expected to be "a confidant, therapist, and parent" to these students. Another issue she has with her role is

what she described as the having to verbally fight with students about completing and turning in their work to other teachers. Mrs. Black noted that she should advocate for her students, but finds that hard to do for some students who simply refuse to do their work.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** Mrs. Black entered the field through a traditional preparation model. When reflecting on her teacher education preparation program, Mrs. Black states that the two things she obtained from her pre-service training include learning how to write IEPs and how to read and analyze data. She feels her teacher preparation program failed to adequately prepare her for the real expectations of the job. In her opinion, she felt her college program “hustled students along to pass their classes.” Mrs. Black does not currently have an advanced degree.

Since she has been on the job, Mrs. Black has received on-going professional development primarily offered by her district’s central office special education department. The topics of these professional development opportunities are mostly related to paperwork and compliance. Additionally, Mrs. Black provide a list of continuing education credits with associated topics she has received during her tenure with her district and which includes mentor training, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) training, Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI) training, Number Worlds math intervention training, attendance at the state Exceptional Children’s Conference, and Post-Secondary Transition training. I specifically asked Mrs. Black if she had received training in research-based literacy approaches or programs for students with disabilities and she stated she was not aware of any that were appropriate for the students at the high school level.

**Perceptions about how other colleagues view the special educator role.** Mrs. Black shared that the majority of her general education colleagues view special education

teachers as babysitters. They expect us to deal with the “bad” kids and reteach the general content that they are responsible for teaching, so students with disabilities can pass the summative course tests. Some of these general educators feel sorry for us and make statements like “bless your heart” because we have to spend our day dealing with challenging students. Mrs. Black believes that many of the general education teachers really do not want to collaborate with the special educators, or “they feel like when we come to them we are always asking them for something extra that they do not feel they should have to do.” It is important to note again, that at this particular high school, there are no co-teaching services provided to students in the general curriculum.

Mrs. Black shared that her current school administrators are very supportive and she feels they understand the role of the special educator. She states that she feels respected by her administration and said they often collaborate with her about important decisions impacting her department. Mrs. Black describes her school administrators as doing things “by the book” and they expect her to lead her department with that same “do it right” philosophy. In answer to my inquiry about why she felt her administrator was so supportive, she explained that the entire special education department and school administrators came together at this school almost three years ago. It was her understanding that the previous school administrators and special education teachers were “stuck in their ways and resistant to change.” Being new and coming in at the same time as the new administration, set her up for a good working relationship with her supervisors. When asked if her professional practice has changed as a result of expectation of other colleagues, Mrs. Black immediately said that she would not change her practices based on what the general education teachers expected of her. She stated that she does her job based on the

special education policies and expectations of her administrators. However, when she disagrees with something she went on to say, “I won’t buck the system if that is what I am told I have to do.”

School administrators provided Mrs. Black with a regular classroom on a main hallway. Her classroom has an adjoining shared office space with another special education teacher. The classroom was furnished with several student desks, tables with chairs, all arranged to allow different working groups. On the whiteboard was the daily essential goal/question for each class period. Mrs. Black shared a sample of a student data notebook she keeps for each student on her caseload.

Mrs. Black also shared teacher interview questions developed by the current principal. These 18 questions were for use when hiring all teachers. One, two-part question specific to special education, was “What is your understanding of 504/IDEA? What kinds of accommodations would you suggest for an ADHD student?” Mrs. Black explained that this principal assembles interview teams for all teacher interviews. Interview teams are to include the principal, an assistant principal, at least one counselor, and the department chair for the respective teaching position- English chair for an English position, special education chair for a special education position.

### **Presentation of Case V: Ms. Taylor**

**Participant and LEA context.** Ms. Taylor is a white female between the ages of 41 and 50. She obtained her special education certification through the traditional method, and holds a bachelor’s degree in communication disorders and a master’s degree in special education from a state university. She has been a special education teacher for approximately 18 years total, three years of which have been in her current school. Ms.

Taylor reported that she has approximately 22 students on her caseload states that her current position is a resource teacher who often does inclusion. Based on her daily schedule and interview responses, her typical day is spent teaching one block of study skills through an elective course. Ms. Taylor spends two blocks providing inclusion support in two different English I classes. She reports having a daily planning period where she typically consults with students on her caseload, plans and schedules meetings, performs various clerical tasks, and often assists administration with discipline of students with disabilities.

Ms. Taylor reported that the high school where she works is part of a suburban community located in the eastern part of the state. She also estimated that the school serves approximately 1000 students total, however actual enrollment data published by the state's department of public instruction indicated that enrollment was around 2000 students total, with 210 students who were eligible for special education services. According to the state's department of public instruction published graduation cohort data, at the end of the 2016-17 school year, the percentage of students who graduate within four years was 81.3% overall, while just 67.9% of students with disabilities did the same.

As for the special educators at the school, their basic responsibilities, and associated supports, Ms. Taylor reported that she is one of 12 to 14 special education teachers providing direct services and completing most of the paperwork associated with students on their caseloads. There is one designated department chair who processes all initial student referrals and, in addition, one other to handle managerial tasks for the EC department. Additionally, the district provides an EC liaison that spends approximately one day per week at this school to attend IEP meetings and help with note taking.

**Participant description of the professional role.** Ms. Taylor provided me with a district generated special education teacher job description and stated that her current position title is resource teacher with some involvement in inclusive settings. When asked to describe her role, Ms. Taylor stated that special education teachers are “classroom teachers, IEP managers, mothers, fathers, therapists, and paperwork processors.”

A more detailed description of Ms. Taylor’s schedule for this semester indicates that during first block, she provides study skill instruction through an elective course. Along with study skills instruction, students who attend this elective course receive help with general education class/homework, IEP goal instruction, and assistance to improve grades in their general content courses. During second period and fourth periods, Ms. Taylor co-teaches English I Inclusion with the same general education teacher. She states, however, that neither she nor the general education teacher has ever received formal co-teaching training. During these second and fourth periods, Ms. Taylor supports students with disabilities and attempts to ensure their goals and accommodations are being addressed. Third period is Ms. Taylor’s planning period, during which time she consults with students, schedules meetings, corresponds with other professionals and families via phone and email, and assists administration with discipline of students with disabilities.

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Ms. Taylor said it is very important to set high goals for herself and for the students she serves. She believes it is very important to help students with disabilities learn and graduate within four years after entering high school. She stated that working with students and their respect for her is what she liked most about her job. When asked about what she likes least in her role, she indicated the rigid requirements regarding when IEP team meetings must be scheduled



(only before or after school), and having to collaborate with other special educators who serve students on her caseload in order to monitor goal progress.

Ms. Taylor stated that her biggest challenge is having students come up from the middle school who are not ready for the high school structure. She elaborated by saying that students in the middle school are provided so much assistance and support to target their individual needs, but once they cross the threshold to high school, they are expected to be independent learners and there is little time for individualized instruction or support. Another challenge is trying to overcome low parental expectations and dealing with parents with very limited knowledge. She described that many of her students are eager to turn sixteen and dropout of school, and their parents often share that same desire. Additionally, she mentioned that paperwork and overall caseload and management was very challenging as well. Even with all these challenges, Ms. Taylor says she is satisfied with her overall career choice because she likes working with students that others typically find difficult or challenging.

Ms. Taylor envisions a typical day as a special educator, in a perfect world, as being able to work with more students individually or across different classes. Another aspect she describes as ideal would be to continue work with students beyond the ninth grade. Currently she only serves students during their freshman year and they move on to another special educator when they become sophomores. She mentions having more time for planning and collaboration with inclusion teachers as important. Finally, she stated that having assistance with scheduling and preparing for IEP team meetings would be an added bonus. In her narrative response describing a situation where she felt she was performing her perceived role, Ms. Taylor shares how she was able to structure a lesson in a previous

English I class that deviated from 90 minutes of lecture to whole group, small group, peer group, and individual group instruction. She incorporated technology and movement into the lesson. Following this lesson, she surveyed her students and found that while many of them admitted that they had been struggling to understand the content, that they really liked her approach and appreciated receiving individual assistance.

When asked how she operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, she stated that special educators should be allowed to modify the general education teacher's lesson plans and improve the literacy needs of students to keep them from dropping out of high school. Ms. Taylor explained that she is not able to do either of these things in her current assignment. When I asked about specific research-based strategies or programs being used, she said that she was not currently using any and no training or resources for this has been provided in the last few years by her school or district. Ms. Taylor mentioned that she knows that intensive research-based interventions are provided to students prior to high school, but given the focus on course credit attainment and expectations at the secondary level, there is no known resources or time to address these needs upon entering ninth grade.

Ms. Taylor shared several things about the special educator's professional role that she believes should to be changed. First, she feels that better or more positive family involvement is needed in her current assignment. She also sees the need for better collaboration with the middle school teachers to promote a smoother transition for students with disabilities who are entering the high school. When describing this transition, she focused more on having the middle school change how they serve students to better reflect what will happen when they come to high school, suggesting less small group intensive

instruction to help them adapt to larger general education classes. Another change she suggests is to improve communication and collaboration with general education teachers. As cited in her narrative response, Ms. Taylor feels that she is expected to do the same non-instructional duties (hall monitoring, lunch supervision, bus duty, etc.) as her general education colleagues, while also scheduling a minimum of 25 IEP team meetings per school year, each of which must be completed before or after school. The difficulty managing the logistics of scheduling meetings around duties and other required team members who will not commit to attending meetings, all falls on Ms. Taylor's shoulders. Ms. Taylor suggests that change or improvement to each challenge is needed, as each is a major obstacle that contributes to role issues or confusion for special educators.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** Ms. Taylor entered the field through a traditional preparation model. When reflecting on her teacher education preparation program, Ms. Taylor states that neither her undergraduate or graduate programs adequately prepared her for what she would be expected to do on the job. It is important to note that her undergraduate degree was in communication disorders, which is related to education, but is more aligned with pursuing advanced training and licensure in speech pathology and audiology. She described her master's program in special education as very general.

Since she has been on the job, Ms. Taylor has received on-going professional development throughout her different career assignments. She specifically mentioned training in classroom management, lesson planning, cued speech, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). Given that over half of her day is spent in inclusive settings or co-teaching, I specifically

asked if she and/or her general education colleague had received formal training in co-teaching, but she stated that neither had participated in this type of professional development. In her current position, she stated that her district used to provide much more professional development, but that over the past few years, these offerings have been very limited. Ms. Taylor believes that the decline in district offered professional development might be the result of budget cuts and limited resources.

**Perceptions about how other colleagues view the special educator role.** Ms. Taylor shared that she feels a small number of her general education teacher peers understand that special educators are highly trained professionals while the majority view us and treat us as teacher assistants. Currently she spends half of her day working with an English teacher who does not like inclusion classes and will not permit Ms. Taylor to instruct any of the students in the two classes that they share. Ms. Taylor thinks that poor experiences with other special educators, who do not represent the profession very well, maybe part of the reason some general education teachers do not respect special education teachers. Another factor that she believes contributes to negative perceptions by general education teachers is their lack of training about the special education services and the role of the special education teacher. She notes that many general education teachers do not feel they have any responsibility in providing accommodations or modification that are included in IEPs. In general, she thinks many of the issues at her school is just overall “high school drama” and compares the behaviors of high school staff to that of high school students. She states just like students have cliques or accepted groups, high school staff has a silo mentality and are not very accepting of the ideas of those outside their group.

Ms. Taylor shared that her current school administrators are very supportive and feel they understand how difficult it is to be a special educator. She states that they have high expectations of the special education staff and want us spending most of our time working with students. “The administration wants us to do our jobs, so that the issues do not come to them.” When asked why she feels her administration is so supportive and understands her role, she stated that one of the two administrators who deals mostly with special education, has a special education background. The other administrator has been many years of experience at different school levels and as she describes, really understands diverse learners. When asked if her professional practice has changed as a result of expectation of other colleagues, Ms. Taylor shared that in her current position she has “yielded” to the other rigid expectations of her general education colleagues, which she states has caused her both mental and physical stress. She described having to “hide” or “sneak” to help students in the inclusion class. In regard to previous experiences, she noted that she has adapted her practice to the needs of her students and professional self-reflection.

Regarding Ms. Taylor’s workspace, she reported that the administration does not currently provide her with a dedicated classroom or office space. She explained that due to the continual growth in student enrollment, the school is “busting at the seams.” Many teachers must share instructional space and work off carts. She has to share office space with several other special education teachers. I met with Ms. Taylor during her planning and it took her several minutes to secure an available office space for us to meet.

Ms. Taylor shared six interview questions that she recalled from her interview with her current administration. Review of these questions indicates that four of the six

questions were specific to the role of the special educator. The other two questions were general in nature and could be typical of questions posed during any employment interview. According to her resume, Ms. Taylor worked with this same district early in her career at an elementary school.

### **Presentation of Case VI: Mrs. Defeo**

**Participant and LEA context.** Mrs. Defeo is a white female between the ages of 31 and 40. She obtained her special education certification through the traditional method, and holds a bachelor's degree in sociology from a state university in South Carolina and a master's degree in special education from a university in Arizona, which led to special education- cross categorical licensure. She has also received licensure in secondary science. Additionally, she has National Board Certification in Mild Disabilities. She has been a special education teacher for a total of fourteen years, all of which she has served at her current school. Mrs. Defeo reported that she has approximately seven students on her caseload and stated that her current position is an OCS science teacher, EC department chair for her school, and serves as her district's transition coordinator. Her reduced caseload was a negotiation with her administrators to allow her more time to manage all of her other assigned duties. Based on her daily schedule and interview responses, her typical day is spent performing multiple duties which include a combination of direct services to students with disabilities at her school, at the early college high school in her district, and a day treatment program in her county, along with overseeing special education post-secondary transition programming for the school district. In addition, Mrs. Defeo has been the coordinator of student council for her high school.

The school where Mrs. Defeo works is located in the western part of the state. Mrs. Defeo described her school as a traditional high school in a very rural area with a limited variety of businesses, industry, and other community resources. The school serves approximately 750 students total, with 70 students eligible for special education services. According to the graduation cohort data, published by the state department of public instruction, at the end of the 2016-17 school year, the percentage of students who graduated within four years was 87.7% for all students and 65.2% of students with disabilities. One concern Mrs. Defeo has about the school is the lack of post-secondary options for students with disabilities and their families, given the limited community resources.

Mrs. Defeo is one of five special education teachers at the school who provides direct services to students. At the time of the study, the school had approximately 70 eligible students who received special education services, 55 followed the future ready core course of study (FR), 15 followed the occupational course of study (OCS), and 10 were accessing the extended content standards or adapted curriculum (AC). Mrs. Defeo stated that at her school, no students receive co-teaching services in the general education classroom. All direct special education instruction is provided to students in the special education classroom, regardless of graduation pathway. She did note that most general education teachers provide the classroom accommodations outlined in student IEPs, and were willing to work with all students, regardless of their abilities. Special education teachers at her school provided direct services and completed most of the paperwork associated with students on their caseloads. The district provided assistance to all schools with a behavior liaison to will help complete functional behavioral assessments (FBA),

behavior intervention plans (BIP), and manifestation determination reviews (MDR) as needed.

**Participant description of the professional role.** Mrs. Defeo was not able to provide me with a formal special education teacher job description. However, when asked to describe her job, she stated that she helps students understand the general curriculum and teaches students pursuing the occupation course of study how to deal with real world experiences for both employment and independent living. Mrs. Defeo is passionate about post-secondary transition services and training for students with disabilities at the high school level. She advocated for her current position, in which she teaches one OCS block per day, allowing her the flexibility to work with high school students in the traditional high school setting, early college high school setting, and a community day treatment setting on post-secondary transition assessment, planning, and services. This position was created at the beginning of this school year, and she is confident that by providing a dedicated staff member who can provide supports, service and monitor student progress, will lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Mrs. Defeo makes her own schedule each day based on the needs of her students, colleagues, and community partners. Each semester she only teaches one class each school day, which allows the remainder of her workday to be open, enabling Mrs. Defeo to perform other tasks and responsibilities. Over the past few years she has also taken on the coordination and oversight of the traditional high school's student council. Mrs. Defeo also shared that she handles all initial referrals and out of state transfer processes for students with disabilities at the school giving her a more flexible schedule and reduced caseload.



Mrs. Defeo wears many professional hats and is responsible for designing and managing her duties. Often, small school districts require split positions, due to the reduced number of students, limited resources, and funding as compared to larger districts who often employ full-time coordinators who are not responsible for any direct instruction. Thus, Mrs. Defeo leads the special education department and supervises the student council in the districts traditional high school, while balancing the coordination of the special education post-secondary transition program for the school district. She is required to work with students and staff in multiple schools and programs, as well as, various businesses and agencies in her community. Many of the duties she is responsible for are more complex than those required of full-time special education teachers.

Mrs. Defeo described a typical workday this semester as starting the day providing direct services to students with disabilities at the early college high school or at a day treatment program in her community. Students in both of these programs do not receive daily services, which allows Mrs. Defeo to rotate the days and times she serves these students. As part of her transition coordinator role, Mrs. Defeo spends time sourcing business partnerships in the community that will lead to internship opportunities for students in her district. Once she has completed her transition coordinator role, Mrs. Defeo reports to the traditional high school where she will spend time most days between late morning and early afternoon collaborating with general and special education colleagues, completing paperwork, holding IEP team meetings, and planning lessons. At the time of this study, during the last period of the school day, Mrs. Defeo taught OCS biology at the traditional high school. At the end of the school day, she said that she performs typical teacher duties such as attending/facilitating department meetings, faculty meetings, IEP

team meetings, collaborating with colleagues, completing paperwork, and preparing or planning for instruction.

When asked about what it means to be a special education teacher, Mrs. Defeo said that special education teachers are faced with many challenges and they must possess “love, patience, flexibility, and emotional resiliency.” She stated that the focus of special educators at the high school level should be on getting students ready for life after high school and helping students realize their strengths and abilities, while recognizing how these relate to real world expectations. Teaching, training, and preparing students for life after high school requires teachers to source appropriate supports for students and be 100% involved in their lives. Interacting with students, the freedom to create this new split position which has allowed her the flexibility to focus in on post-secondary training, and a lightened case load are the things that Mrs. Defeo likes best about her current role. When asked about what she likes least in her job, she immediately responded, “paperwork and the lack of time in general to do all that I need to do.”

Mrs. Defeo stated that in addition to the daily expectations, are challenges. When asked about her biggest challenges she said that it is the lack of time to adequately do all the things she needs to do. Another challenge, specific to her new split role, is learning a personal organization method to effectively manage all of her duties. While she advocated for this new split role position, Mrs. Defeo shared the difficulty she has had moving from a very structured workday to a flexible, ever-changing work schedule. She also said that many of the students she serves come to high school unprepared, with very unrealistic post-secondary expectations. She went on to say that often times the parents of her students enable or encourage students to not pursue work because they are worried that employment

could impact their welfare benefits. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Defeo made the point that her community lacks many resources to promote successful post-secondary outcomes for students wishing to pursue continued training, work or live in the area. Finally, Mrs. Defeo described the challenges of balancing her professional duties and personal life. She states that “teaching is a life commitment” and consumes so much of your time, if you do it right. Since becoming a mother, she struggles with her expectations of her professional self and devotion to her family life. When asked if she was satisfied with her career choice, Mrs. Defeo said that she was overall, but not everyday. She went on to say that she feels that she has done great things with students and enjoys seeing them experience success, long after leaving high school. These are the reasons why she chose this profession, but she notes that it is very hard work.

Mrs. Defeo envisions what a typical day should be in a perfect world, as being able to just perform the role of the transition coordinator. She said that if that was not possible and she were a full-time teacher again, she would like the ability to teach the same subject, to a small number of students, three out of four blocks per day. While she advocated for her split EC OCS teacher/transition coordinator position, she feels that completing all the responsibilities is quite overwhelming, even with a reduced caseload to manage. In her narrative response detailing a situation where she felt she was performing her perceived role, Mrs. Defeo describes how she assisted a student following the OCS pathway, in exploring four year university life skills programs, applying to these programs, helping the student and her family with scholarship, grant, and loans to fund college, and following her progression once the student was accepted and began attending a university. She shared that this student will not graduate with a degree, but she is gaining valuable life and

vocational skills on a college campus, unlike most students who pursue the OCS pathway. Mrs. Defeo takes pride in her commitment to assist this student in the pursuit and realization of her post-secondary aspirations and states that is why she loves working with students with diverse needs at the high school level.

When asked how she operationalizes the IDEA requirement for specially designed instruction, Mrs. Defeo states that it is to work with students in small groups to address their IEP goals and assist with curriculum at each student's instructional level. She shared that in the past her school had offered inclusion services in the general curriculum, but felt that this methodology was ineffective. Direct instructional services are now provided to all students with disabilities, regardless of eligibility category or course of study pathway, through small group instruction in a curriculum support elective credit course. Students who are on the OCS pathway receive all of their core curriculum courses (math, English, science, social studies) in small classes by teachers who are dually certified in the content subject and special education, or online with a combination of a special education teacher paired with a general education teacher through the states virtual public school (VPS).

Mrs. Defeo shared several things about the professional role that she believes are in need of change. First, she believes that the amount of paperwork required for every student is unnecessary, citing that special education teachers at the high school level know what they need to be working on with their students and do not need specific goals related to improving foundational reading, writing, and math skills. She does see value in transition planning, goals, and services, but believes that by the time students enter high school, special education teachers do not need to focus on improving these basic skills. She stated, "We need to do high school differently," and emphasized the need to help students get their

diploma by “pushing students through their classes.” Mrs. Defeo feels the state focuses on forcing all students through a university preparation course of study, which she believes is wrong. She states, “Not all students want or need to go to a four year university.” Finally, Mrs. Defeo wishes that there were more vocational pathways offered at the high school level.

Another professional practice that Mrs. Defeo believes needs to be improved upon is the requested or required non-instructional duties imposed on special education teachers. According to her narrative response on an experience that does not align with her perceived role of the special educator, she describes being asked to run the Student Council at her high school.

It became too much, with all the duties I have as a special education teacher, with a caseload of 17, department head, transition coordinator, etc. Special educators have a time and half job as it is. Extracurricular duties should be weighed out heavily as to the additional time commitment placed on them.

During her interview, Mrs. Defeo indicated she strives to be a part of the total school program and her time on Student Council allowed for her to increase extra-curricular activity access for students with disabilities; however, the additional responsibility was simply too much to add to an already overwhelming daily work load.

**Factors contributing to the professional role.** Mrs. Defeo entered the field through a traditional preparation model. When asked if her teacher education preparation program prepared her for the job, Mrs. Defeo emphatically said, “Hell no!” She said the yearlong internship required by her master’s program was more beneficial than her student teaching experience, but still lacked authentic practicality because it was in a

charter/magnet middle school. The skills her pre-service program did provide her include teaching how to write a lesson plan and how to conduct and analyze assessments. Mrs. Defeo believes that teacher preparation programs need to provide more student teaching opportunities earlier in the program; so aspiring teachers can get real world experience and come back to the college classroom to learn how to effectively address the needs of the student. Mrs. Defeo said that more college courses are needed on time management, organization systems or methods, balancing the professional and personal life, and how to effectively collaborate with colleagues, paraprofessionals, supervisors, and parents. Finally, Mrs. Defeo believes that teacher preparation programs and licensure should be less broad and more specific to the ages and needs of the students served. For example, most special education teachers in this state have a K-12 general or adaptive curriculum license. She recommends providing differentiated training for teachers who will serve older students versus younger students, as well as, differing pathways for those wishing to teach students with mild disabilities as compared to students with more intensive disabilities.

Since she has been on the job, Mrs. Defeo has received on-going professional development primarily offered by her district's central office special education department. The topics of these professional development opportunities are mostly related to paperwork and compliance. Additionally, Mrs. Defeo has participated in Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI) training, Post-Secondary Transition training, Autism Spectrum Disorder training, and she attended the states Exceptional Children's Conference. Mrs. Defeo did not mention any explicit research-based program/strategy trainings associated with literacy, math, or executive functioning needs that are typical of most students with disabilities.

**Perceptions about how other colleagues view the special educator role.** Mrs.

Defeo shared that the majority of her general education colleagues understand that special education teachers are case managers for the students on their caseloads. They expect us to communicate with them on how to accommodate and modify instruction in their classes, but they know that they have to provide those accommodations to the students. The general education teachers treat us as professionals, and they know that we have our own classes or groups to teach throughout the day, as well as extensive paperwork requirements. In the past, we were expected to use our curriculum support classes like a study hall, helping students complete class or homework from general education, however, over the past few years, this has changed and they (general education teachers) understand that we have to address the student's IEP goals during this time. Mrs. Defeo believes that intentional discussions with the entire faculty about the purpose of special education classes and the role of the special education teacher, that has been incorporated into faculty meetings has contributed to the transformation in general education teachers' expectations and perceptions about the role of special educators in this school. It is important to note again, that at this particular high school, there is no co-teaching services provided to students in the general curriculum, however, general education teachers do provide accommodations and modifications directly to these students in their classes.

Mrs. Defeo shared that her current school administrators are very supportive and she feels they understand the role of the special educator. She states that her administrators expect special education teachers to complete the paperwork associated with IDEA, plan and deliver direct instruction to students with disabilities and monitor student performance. Mrs. Defeo describes her school administrators as viewing the special educators as the “go

to people” for all things related to special education, making her and her colleagues feel respected and valued by the administration. She describes how she advocated for her current position and said administrators agreed and have been very supportive by allowing her the flexibility to do what she needs to do while also reducing her caseload responsibilities. Recently, Mrs. Defeo suggested that the administrator assist the special education teachers by completing the prior written notice forms associated with all IEP team meetings, and they have agreed. I inquired as to why she feels her administrators are so supportive and she explained that there is good communication, collaboration, and training provided to school administrators by the district’s current special education director. When asked if her professional practice has changed as a result of the expectations of other colleagues, Mrs. Defeo explained that her practice has only changed as the result of her own changing views, not the expectation of her colleagues or supervisors. She described evolving as an educator based on experience and her own professional goals, specifically related to improving post-secondary transition services for her students.

To ensure that Mrs. Defeo has a good place to do her work, the school administration provided Mrs. Defeo an office, located off the of the media center. The office contains a faculty desk, shelves, cabinets, and a small worktable with several chairs in the center. The office area had internal windows, allowing two-way visibility for occupants in the media center and the office area. A student attempted to stop by during our interview, but Mrs. Defeo was able to provide a visual signal for him indicating that she was busy. Mrs. Defeo pointed out that she is still trying to develop an organization system to manage all of her responsibilities.



Mrs. Defeo shared the interview questions that she says her school administration uses when hiring a new special education teacher or paraprofessional. The seven questions included four general questions that may be asked of any educator, and three questions more specific to meeting the behavioral, transition, and daily living needs of students with disabilities. Mrs. Defeo explained that the school administration assembles an interview committee for all EC teacher interviews which includes the department chair, the assistant principal, the principal, and sometimes the EC or personnel director. She went on to say that candidates selected for interview were pre-screened by both the EC and personnel directors.

### **Cross Case Analysis**

These six multiple case studies were conducted to examine the perceived roles of secondary special educators and to provide an opportunity to explore both the similarities and differences in the reported professional duties of these teachers. Each case was bounded by time, school level, teaching licensure area, and state policy regulations. The research involved the utilization of a multiple case design that allowed the researcher to observe possible similarities among the cases occurring at the same time (Stake, 2006). I identified themes that emerged from each case and explored commonalities, specific to the guiding research questions, across all six cases. Each case in isolation provides insight to the perceived roles of secondary special educators; however, the common experiences and themes that emerged in this research validate areas of shared meaning. According to Yin (2014), multiple case designs reduce the vulnerability of the research and “the analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial” (p. 64). The experiences and

practices of these six teachers varied. The findings from each case allowed assertions to be made based on secondary special education role descriptions.

Four common themes emerged from the cross-case analysis. Those themes were, (1) inclusion as service, not a philosophy; (2) disconnection between the daily instructional practices and the prescribed goals and services of each individual education program (IEP); (3) secondary special educators as the “jack of all trades and master of none;” and (4) secondary special educators viewed as subordinates to general education colleagues. In order to provide individual evidence of each theme across all cases, I recorded data including quotations from each participant exemplifying and highlighting the common experiences emerging in the research. Each theme is addressed below.

**Inclusion as a service, not a philosophy.** Inclusion is a very popular term in the field of special education. According to Friend (2014), the term *inclusion* can be misused to represent services such as co-teaching or to describe a location for such services when, in actuality, inclusion is a philosophy stating that students with disabilities can be educated alongside of their non-disabled peers. When asked to describe current positions or responsibilities, all six of these participants used the term *inclusion* to describe either the type of services they provided or to emphasize that their school does not utilize inclusion services at all. None of the participants referred to inclusion as a philosophy and often described services provided to students with disabilities in the general education setting as a requirement or expectation by either the school administration or district leadership.

Five of the six participants described their role or services as inclusion. Mr. Allen specifically referred to himself as an “inclusion teacher.” Mrs. Maddie described the scheduled course titles for services as “Inclusion American History” or “Inclusion English

I.” She also shared that the only type of service offered at her school was inclusion. When probed on how they offer the full continuum of services, Mrs. Maddie responded:

We are allowed to pull out here and there to do activities, but I think some of those lower inclusion kids, the ones that used to be resource kids and even some of our higher OCS kids need more time in small groups.

Yet given the push from the district office, Mrs. Maddie stated that her school is “full inclusion for every student this school year.”

In contrast, Mrs. Black and Mrs. Defeo stated that at their schools offered no inclusion services at all. In both schools, students with disabilities were in fact educated alongside non-disabled peers, but the term *inclusion* for these teachers meant there was no direct special education services provided by special educators while in the general education setting. When describing the type of services offered at her school, Mrs. Defeo stated,

Curriculum support class is an elective credit and that is our service time [for the IEP]. We don’t have a pullout or inclusion program here. So, if our students are going to get support services, they are enrolled in that curriculum support class, which is not the most ideal. We have tried inclusion, but with the lack of teachers, it is just hard to hit.

Table 3 provides data collected supporting this theme.

Table 3

*Research Data Exemplifying Theme One: Inclusion as a Service, Not a Philosophy*

Participant	Data Source	Description
Mr. Allen	Interview Data	“I am an inclusion teacher” “I taught Occupational Course of Study (OCS) for three years and then came over here and started teaching inclusion.”
Mrs. Maddie	Interview Data	“As the inclusion teacher sometimes it is hard for us because we are with two or three different teachers [general education] a day. We have to adjust to their [general educators] style and just kind of implementing as much as we can in there, but sometimes that is challenging.”
Mrs. Walters	Interview Data	“I am now teacher of record for English so I can teach both general and special education students”
Mrs. Black	Teacher Schedule/Field Notes	“I was doing eighth grade reading, math, and science inclusion, but it wasn’t actually a true co-teaching experience. The teachers did not share the responsibility of teaching the classroom. The math teacher would tell me to take those children [special education students] and get them out of her face. They were not open to allowing me to teach lessons.”
Ms. Taylor	Interview Data	“I do mainly inclusion. I have to provide all the accommodations and modifications to the students on my caseload.”
Mrs. Defeo	Interview Data	“We don’t have pull out or an inclusion program here”

Regardless of whether or not the participants defined their specific role or services using the word *inclusion*, they all used the term in the same manner, as an adjective describing a professional or service title instead of a noun representing a philosophy. None of these participants defined inclusion or inclusive practices as the act of students with disabilities being educated alongside of their non-disabled peers; rather, inclusion was consistently described as a specific type of service or continuum. With regard to the roles and responsibilities for providing accommodations, supplementary aids and supports to students in the general curriculum, about half of these participants described this to be solely the responsibility of the special educator, while the other half described a more shared and collaborative approach between the general and special education staff.

**Disconnect between instruction and the IEP.** The cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) is the development of an Individual Education Program (IEP). The IEP is developed and reviewed at least annually to meet the educational and functional needs of students resulting from their qualifying disabilities. Special education teachers are integral part of the multi-disciplinary team who develop IEPs for students with disabilities. The participants in this research all expressed similar perceptions regarding the paperwork responsibilities associated with their role as a special educator. A strong theme emerged indicating disconnect between development, implementation, and progress monitoring of IEPs and the daily instructional practices of these teachers.

In each case, all participants expressed the burden that special education paperwork causes teachers. When asked what they would change about the role, paperwork and specific documentation for IEP progress was a prevalent response. Mrs. Walters stated, “I know it [paperwork] is intended to protect them [special education students] and to make

sure things are being done for them. However, I do feel like it hinders what we can do with them at times.” Likewise in reference to the paperwork compliance expectations in her school, Mrs. Black stated, “I know it’s the most important part, the large amounts of paperwork.” Another example of the frustration regarding the paperwork requirements described by Mrs. Defeo, “I understand providing a quality program on paper for these kids and say ‘this is what we are doing’; but we are doing that plus so much more.” The following table (Table 4) provides a summary of data gathered from each participant relating to this expressed topic.

Table 4

*Data Exemplifying Theme Two: Disconnect Between Instructional Practices and the IEP*

Participant	Data Source	Description
Mr. Allen	Interview Data	<p>“I use that study skills time for is to just kind of work on anything that can help them be a better student and then kind of through that I work on their IEP goals”</p> <p>“To be honest with you, I kind of try to go with the trend, to kind of get the net to catch as many folks as possible in what I do and then I also bounce around from one topic to another. I try to make sure I touch on everybody [students on caseload] at least once in a week.”</p>
Mrs. Maddie	Interview Data	<p>“Why can’t I just teach kids? Why do I have to do all this other stuff [IEP paperwork]? I just want to work with kids.”</p> <p>“When referring to expectations of administrators and practice, “they [administrators] want to do what works best for the schedule [master] more sometimes than what is best for the kids [special education students].”</p>

Mrs. Walters Interview Data “I get them [students] and change the IEP to really match [what we are doing] and the paperwork is extremely important, but what is most important is what I’m doing in front of them [in class].”

“I think there is confusion on how to write IEP goals at the high school level because they [students] are performing well below the standards. I always try to provide time to work on class assignments. Everything is supposed to be individual for that child, but it feels like something it’s only so individual because you’ve got a certain schedule that you have to follow.”

Mrs. Black Interview Data “We haven’t explicitly gotten training on how to use the IEP in teaching. Kids at the high school level are already expected to know the basics.”

“We are trying to hustle them along just to pass the class. It is a race to the finish line to get them to graduate. There is a push for us [special educators] to remediate and tutor the general curriculum.”

Ms. Taylor Interview Data When referring to case management and implementing services and progress monitoring of IEP goals- “That’s been a county wide problem, we are all trying to figure out, legally, who’s providing those goals because nobody really is.”

“One of the biggest problems is in theory, we should be able to handle changing or modifying the general education lesson so that it is specialized and individual for the student. It is hard to do that when there is 30 plus kids and the curriculum is so fast. I wish I could actually do my job.”

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Mrs. Defeo Interview Data “I’m just not a big fan of paperwork. I

understand providing a quality program on paper for these kids”

“It is the data processing and writing of annual IEP goals that I do not like. I just sometimes feel like it’s blah, blah, blah, blah. I just don’t feel connected to that part because I know these kids and what they need, and you can’t always put that into an annual goal.”

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While all participants shared disdain for the paperwork requirements, most provided similar descriptions to define and operationalize specially designed instruction for students with disabilities at the secondary level. In each case, the participants stated that the primary purpose for specially designed instruction was to help students pass their classes and graduate high school. Yet many of them struggled to describe specific strategies or research-based interventions that address specific academic or functional deficits exhibited by students on their caseloads. Mrs. Black stated, “I think our biggest role is not teaching them their two plus two facts and how to read a word, but more what can they do to be job or college ready.” She goes on to say, “As a secondary teacher, the kids are already expected to know the basics; when they get to us, it’s cramming stuff down their throats, assuming they know the prerequisites, when they don’t.” When asked about how she plans lessons for providing special education services to her students, Mrs. Black said, “We don’t really have a lesson plan. It is more so pushing the curriculum [general content] of the other teachers and getting the kids [students with disabilities] to pass their [general education] class.”

The challenges of scheduling services at the high school level contributed to this theme of disconnection between individualized education programs and the services these



professionals provide. Ms. Taylor expressed that scheduling is one of the biggest problems she has to deal with in her current role. She provided this example,

I have 25 students on my caseload, but I do not see them all throughout the day. So, in the spring semester they have English goals and I am not there (in an English class) and my student may not be scheduled in an English class. This is a countywide problem; we are all trying to figure out, legally, who is providing those goals because nobody really is.

Mrs. Maddie shares the challenges of trying to fit supports and services into her schedule and said,

Every day is different and I do spend two blocks a day in the classroom [general education] working with kids, but because one of those blocks is an American history class and I don't have a background in American history, therefore I can only do as much as I can do.

Yet she feels her school has the scheduling of services down to science by completing a co-teaching checklist at the beginning of every semester that administration wants every teaching pair to complete together. When asked if the co-teaching teams (general education and special education teachers) have ever had training in the co-teaching process, Mrs. Maddie said no.

All six participants shared a respect for the post-secondary transition process required for all students with disabilities age fourteen and older. These six teachers had similar beliefs that helping students prepare for life after high school was an important part of the role of the special educator. Like the academic activities, they were not as specific in describing how they planned, implemented or progress monitored transition goals for the

students they served. Mr. Allen explained that many of the materials available to him that meet the reading level of his students are not age appropriate, yet many of the grade level texts are focused solely on the student who wishes to pursue a university post-secondary education. He said referring to his role, “My job is to kind of differentiate—okay, so we need to get you [a student] through high school. So, we are going to do that, but then also what do we need to do on top of that?” When elaborating on how he provides specially designed instruction to the students on his caseload, he said, “So, I try to do the best I can and spread it [special education] out to everybody. Again, with so many students and so many different goals and so many different needs, it is difficult.”

Finally, with this particular theme, most of the participants described being expected to assist students with core content remediation, general education tutoring, or using some portion of the special education service delivery time helping students with work assigned by the general classroom teacher. Even Mrs. Walters who was scheduled to provide a research-based reading intervention during all three of her instructional blocks stated “I try to provide them [students] time each day to work on assignments from other classes.” She feels this is part of what she describes the case management responsibilities she has for students on her caseload is to help them address things they need help with in other classes, in order to ensure that her students receive course credit.

**“Jack of all trades and master of none.”** The third most common theme that arose across all six cases was an expectation to perform a diverse variety of duties, which made it very difficult to hone their professional craft. Mr. Allen describes it this way,

I’ve also got to be flexible and realize that one minute I could be teaching, the next minute going across campus to make sure a student is in class, and the next minute

calling to talk to a parent about something. It's almost like there is no real defined role. It is just whatever needs to be done at the moment.

When asked what he would change about his role as a special education teacher, Mr. Allen expressed concern with the lack of time to really instruct students based on all the other duties that are expected of him; he stated with more staff and more time;

I'd be better able to deliver instruction that would help them meet their goals, better able to keep tabs on them. I mean it is kind of like a watered down approach the way it is now and that is just the nature of special education- not just in this district but also across the country, unfortunately.

Likewise, Ms. Taylor shared a similar account when describing her schedule of daily duties,

During my planning period each day, I'm returning phone calls, looking at my consult kids, answering on average 40 emails a day, making sure my IEP people are going to be at meetings, and whatever else comes up during that time. I often get called for kids that are having issues in another classroom.

The structure of Mrs. Black's schedule is a prime example of the varied expectations placed upon her in her current role. Her school follows a four by four block schedule. During each of the three block periods that Mrs. Black is assigned students, she is responsible for between six to nine students following the future core ready diploma track and receiving a variety of academic support time, along with approximately four students following the occupational course of study (OCS) for which she is responsible for teaching the content class (English I), and providing instruction on the extended content standards for at least one student. This comes out to approximately 14 different preps for one 90-

minute block of time. Even during her scheduled planning time, Mrs. Black is responsible for providing course instruction for two different students following the extended content standards and who come in to school during this time on different days due to either modified day or homebound placement. A summary of all six participants data surrounding this theme is reflected in the following table (Table 5).

Table 5

*Data Exemplifying Theme Three: Jack-of-All-Trades and Master of None*

Participant	Data Source	Description
Mr. Allen	Interview Data	<p>“I wear a lot of different hats and they [administrators] understand that I will be in different areas doing different things at all different times.”</p> <p>“I would say time is probably the biggest obstacle. There is just not enough me to go around in the time that I’m given.”</p>
Mrs. Maddie	Interview Data	<p>When describing a typical day- “Some days I am calming parents down and answering questions,. . . Then sometimes I’m a counselor to the adults in the building, and dealing with personnel issues, they usually come to me first [before administration], and I spend two blocks a day in the classroom.”</p> <p>“It is really hard to do both [paperwork and teaching] and feel like you’re doing well at both. There are days I go home and I don’t feel like I did well at either because I’m pulled in so many different directions.”</p>
Mrs. Walters	Interview Data	<p>“Being an EC teacher they call on you to do more. In addition to the paperwork, meetings, and planning for and providing reading intervention instruction, I have to deal with discipline issues, call parents, change student schedules, help with</p>

general education assignments, and many other unexpected things that I am called to do.”

“Planning is the first time of day that I get the opportunity to check my box. If I make it back from the office without being stopped to deal with a situation or a parent coming in- planning is just a lot of things that were unexpected that I’m called to do.”

Mrs. Black	Review of Mrs. Black’s Daily Schedule	Three out of four blocks she is providing academic support services to between 6 and 9 students following future core pathway, occupational course of study curriculum up to 4 students and extended content standards for up to 2 students per block; Planning block includes instruction for 2 students on extended content pathway as well
	Interview Data	“One of the biggest challenges is not enough time in the day to everything we need to do and do it legally. I spend a lot of time after school hours providing IEPs, collecting data, talking to parents, sending emails to teachers, and tutoring students.”
Ms. Taylor	Interview Data	“I am a classroom teacher, an IEP manager, a mother, a father, and a therapist.”
	Narrative Response describing a situation that did not align with her perceived professional role	Ms. Taylor describes continually being asked to do duties such as hall monitoring, lunch and bus duty when her caseload increased and all IEP team meetings must be completed after school hours.
Mrs. Defeo	Interview Data	Referring to college preparatory programs- “They should really prepare you for the fact that you will do this job outside of your daily hours; you will do this job on weekends; no one tells you

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that stuff.”

“At one time, I was teaching, doing the transition parts for a group, paperwork, going out and advocating in the community. You always feel like you’re behind. I always feel like I am treading water, just trying to get to the surface. Always.”

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The majority of these participants served as department chairs at their schools. Most all participants provided a comprehensive list of expected duties that in addition to the typical duties that a department chair would perform, included direct instruction, paperwork, meetings, consulting with parents, students and staff, planning, dealing with student or staff issues. Only two of these participants were given a reduced instructional load to manage all these additional duties. Yet in exchange for the reduced instructional blocks, these two participants were assigned additional duties, which included running student council (Mrs. Defeo), serving as the district’s transitional coordinator (Mrs. Defeo), securing all substitute teachers for the special education department (Mrs. Maddie), and planning for and facilitating a professional learning community (PLC) group within the school. It is important to note that all of these participants are compensated on the same pay scale as both special education and general education teachers across their district and state, with no additional financial supplement or incentive.

**Special educator as subordinate to general educator.** The final common theme discovered across all six cases was a lower perceived status or ranking of special education teachers as compared to their general education teacher peers. This theme surfaced in several ways including, a pervasive practice in which special education teachers who are expected to provide services to students in the general education setting, often referred to as

inclusion services or co-teaching, were treated as subordinates by the general education teacher; and special education teachers being regularly pulled from instructional or planning duties to cover general education classes, to provide accommodations or modifications currently assigned to a general education teacher, fill in for a paraprofessional or general educators who are absent, or deal with a disciplinary issues of students with disabilities. These perceived expectations coincide with all of the preceding common themes described above. The table (Table 6) below captures participant data to summarize this theme.

Table 6

*Data Exemplifying Theme Four: Special Educator as Subordinate to General Educator*

Participant	Data Source	Description
Mr. Allen	Interview Data	“Teachers [general education] are a very territorial breed. For whatever reason, they like to be kind of in control of how things are taught and they want it done their way. Some will share their classroom and let me do a little teaching.”
Mrs. Maddie	Interview Data	“A lot of them [general educators] it’s more of a control thing- it’s their classroom and that’s the way it’s going to be. You [special educators] can come in and do what they tell you to do, but they are in charge of everything.”  “We do have teachers [general education] that view us more as assistants and really just want us to make copies and do things like that for them.”
Mrs. Walters	Interview Data	“Co-teaching is horrible when you are with someone [general educator] who doesn’t want to give up any of that instruction and you are in there kind of as an assistant.”-

		<p>“Some general educators expect us [special educators] to do all the classroom accommodations and make all the parent contacts for the kids because they are on our caseload- one less student they have to worry about.”</p>
Mrs. Black	Interview Data	<p>When referring to general educators, “I feel like we are looked at as babysitters. You [special educators] are just there to get them [special education students] to pass the class.”</p> <p>Referring to general educators- “They don’t think it’s part of their job to give these kids [special education] accommodations or to help modify assignments or any of those kind of things.”</p>
Ms. Taylor	Interview Data	<p>“Some of our staff still think of us as aides. When I see some students struggling in the inclusion class I help them out in the weeds, kind of hiding from the general educator.”</p> <p>“We are still looked down upon by many general educators as they think we don’t do anything. I’ve been called the grim reaper because as soon as I come in they know I need a meeting or something.”</p>
Mrs. Defeo	Interview Data	<p>“It [special education support classes] used to be like a study hall. General education teachers sent students with work from their classes that needed to be completed or sent a test there to be worked on by special educators; That is beginning to change and we are starting to have conversations about the purpose of this time.”</p>

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Half of the participant daily schedules included instructional time in the general education setting, or as they define it, inclusion or co-teaching. It is important to note again, that in each of these cases, there had not been any formal co-teaching training for the special and general educator pairs. Two of the three participants felt that their current co-teaching arrangement is a positive and collaborative experience, due to strong administrative support and the ability to be an integral part of the scheduling of the co-teaching groups each semester. Mr. Allen describes his experience this way,

I've established a network of teachers [general education] here that I work well with and administration has been really great as far as letting me continue to work with these teachers. I work with teachers that kind of will share their classroom and open up and let me do a little teaching and they understand that I am there to help.

Mrs. Maddie describes her co-teaching experience as very positive for the most part. She stated,

My OCS kiddos are very needy, so a lot of my time is spent explaining what the teacher [general education] just said in a different way to them while class is going on. So, I might not get up and co-teach for the whole class, but I'm back there working with my OCS kiddos. For those [general education teachers] accepting of us [special education teachers], that is what it [co-teaching] looks like.

When asked if she has complete choice of who to pair with for co-teaching, she explained that there are still a few general education teachers who are not as willing to work with special education teachers. In those cases, Mrs. Maddie said, "We [special education teachers] draw straws to see who has to go into their [the hesitant general educators'] classrooms."

The other participant described her co-teaching experiences as less than ideal. Ms. Taylor was paired with the same English teacher for two of the four instructional blocks of the day during the semester that this research was conducted. With both of these English blocks, the general educator is frustrated that she has so many students who are below grade level in reading. Ms. Taylor shared that she has offered multiple times to work with her on planning and delivering differentiated instruction to address the needs of the entire class, but this general education teacher has been resistant. When I asked what Ms. Taylor does to serve her students in those classes, she responded:

I don't do anything and that's unfortunate. I've even offered to break up the class into small groups, but her [general education teacher] end theory is, it is my name on the report card. I went to administration several times, but our principal hired her and the assistant principal over the special education department has tried as well, but nothing happens, so you kind of just go, okay.

Another factor that many of these participants perceive as demeaning involves being asked to do duties that are outside of their current job descriptions. All participants shared the importance of being team players and have an understanding that public educators are expected to do more with less resources, yet, most described activities they are asked to do that would not be asked or expected of their general education colleagues. Mr. Allen describes in his narrative an experience when he was pulled from direct instruction to serve as a one-on-one assistant for a student with physical disabilities because the paraprofessional was absent. He shared that while he did not mind helping this student, he felt "devalued" because he "was told, not asked" by his case manager to assist this student, since he was a male. Mrs. Maddie describes a very a similar experience in her

narrative where she states that special education teachers are often pulled from their services to cover classes for general education teachers. When discussing this she said she believes this happens because special educators are viewed as having less numbers of students to serve and these services are not on the same level as general education courses. While she knows that such activities are a demonstration of being a “team member in the school”, she feels these “may not necessarily be a secondary special education teachers’ role.”

Most all of the participants described feeling ultimately responsible for all aspects of the education of the students on their caseloads. This manifested in a feeling that they were assistants to their general education colleagues, rather than a partner in serving students with disabilities. For example, when students were struggling or missing work in the general education courses, most all of these special educators shared that they were expected to help the students get caught up with missing general education assignments, remind them to turn in assignments, call parents when there were issues in the general education class, and/or be the sole provider of general education accommodations and modifications. When referring to general educators, Mrs. Black said, “They don’t think it is part of their job to collect data. They don’t think it is part of their job to give these kids accommodations or to help modify assignments or those kinds of things.” She goes on to describe one general education colleague at her school who does not want any students with disabilities assigned to her class and will complain to administration. Mrs. Black stated that this career and technical education (CTE) teacher teaches very relevant and important courses that many of the students with disabilities could benefit from; however, this CTE teacher will tell Mrs. Black and administration, “I don’t feel like I should have to

have them,” referring to students with disabilities. Mrs. Maddie shares similar experiences in that she has come to accept that as a special educator, some general educators “view us more as assistants and really just want us to make copies and do things for them.” Mrs. Maddie goes on to describe the challenge of trying to partner with different general education colleagues, “We have to adjust to their style I guess and just kind of implement as much as we can while we are in their [general education] class.” The terms “babysitter” and “teacher assistant” were used often among these participants to describe how they are often viewed in their professional setting.

**Unique theme.** The data gathered from the interviews and artifacts yielded the common themes described above, in addition to one unique theme. The unique theme was discovered in Mrs. Walter’s case. Unlike the other five cases, Mrs. Walters was the only participant who specifically described providing researched based reading intervention tailored to each of her student’s individual reading needs. She described a model developed by her school and district to assess, group, and deliver intensive reading instruction to meet the needs of both students with disabilities and non-disabled students who were performing below grade level in reading. This programming model was unique as compared the other five participants’ description of their professional activities and daily schedules. While Mrs. Walters experienced many aspects of the four common themes, her professional activity descriptions were different in many ways given this reading intervention model currently being implemented at her school.

## **Conclusion**

The findings generated by both the case-by-case and cross-case analysis indicate that all six participants share four common themes and many common perceptions about

what it means to be a special education teacher, who serves students with high incidences disabilities at the secondary level. In addition to the four specific themes identified, these six participants share similar job descriptions or titles and work under the same state guidelines, yet their daily professional activities vary greatly. In the next chapter, I will discuss each of the four common themes generated in relation to the literature from the field and the theoretical framework that guided this research. Finally, I will explore implications and recommendations for practice and further research.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

The field of special education is as diverse as the needs of students with disabilities. The ever-evolving practices of the special education teacher is both exciting and challenging. Special educators must continually consider a variety of factors while balancing their professional roles. These factors include unique needs of students with disabilities, the accountability standards placed on all educators as a result of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), regulatory requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the increasing legal liability that accompanies compliant implementation of special education services in public schools. Improving outcomes for students with disabilities requires highly trained educators who exhibit the knowledge, skills, and performance indicators identified and defined by the Council for Exceptional Children (2017): (1) Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences, (2) Learning Environments, (3) Curricular Content Knowledge, (4) Assessment, (5) Instructional Planning and Strategies, (6) Professional Learning and Ethical Practice, and (7) Collaboration. According to Boe and Cook (2006), balancing these demands with the expectations of colleagues, supervisors, and parents have resulted in increased special educator burn-out and teacher turn-over rates, causing many public school districts to resort to alternative licensing practices in an effort to hire and retain special education teachers. The purpose of this research was to explore the professional role perceptions of secondary special education teachers, who predominantly serve students with high incidence or mild disabilities and who are pursuing a regular high school diploma.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this research was social constructionism (Gergen, 1985). In particular, I wanted to see how the perceived roles of secondary special educators were constructed and evolved given the social interactions with a variety of stakeholders in combination with societal and institutional influences that continue to shape and define what it means to be a special education teacher. Throughout this research project, examples highlighting how each participant continually constructed meaning about his or her professional role were evident. The guiding research question is as follows: What are the perceived roles of secondary special education teachers who serve students with high incidence disabilities and how do these educators' role perceptions contribute to their work practices and day-to-day choices with students and fellow teachers? Several sub-questions follow:

1. How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?
2. To what or whom do secondary level special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?
3. How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and work practices to those learned in their educator preparation programs?
4. Is there a difference in how special educators define their own roles and how they perceive their colleagues to define their role in educating students with disabilities?
5. What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?

In this chapter, I will discuss the four common themes discovered in the cross-case analysis, connecting each theme back to the literature and the theoretical framework. Next, I will explore how data from each of these six cases align with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) professional standards for special educators (Appendix H). Then, I will discuss the implications of this research study on practice. Finally, I will conclude with recommendations for future research.

### **Theme One: Inclusion as a Service, Not a Philosophy**

Inclusion is a philosophy that students with disabilities can be educated with their non-disabled peers (Friend, 2014). The term *inclusion*, therefore, according to the online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2018), is a noun defined as “the act or practice of including students with disabilities in regular school classes” (para.4). Inclusion, as described by the participants in this study was used as an adjective to describe the type of role or service they provided as special educators and was prevalent throughout the data gathered. From a social constructionist view, this is one example of how meaning was continually made and changed between the micro and macro levels, across language, categories, and basic beliefs that are identified and named by subjective processes (Gergen, 1985). This theme left me questioning whether the terminology we use influence our daily activities and performance and does conceptual semantics, a study of the cognitive structure of meaning, really matter in how we define professional roles?

All six participants referred to inclusion through a descriptive lens. Inclusion services were mentioned as something that had to be done, rather than a belief that students with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers. This is not to say that many of the participants either directly or indirectly referred to an understanding of the



importance of educating students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), but these statements were usually in reference to policy and scheduling discussions. This leads me to wonder if the philosophical root of inclusion in special education has been operationalized to a descriptive act, transforming the original meaning based on the daily practices of special education teachers in the school setting. In other words, in order to meet the requirements of LRE, inclusion services or inclusion teachers have become a practice, rather than a belief.

### **Theme Two: Disconnect Between Instructional Practices and the IEP**

Across all six cases, it was evident that these participants were primarily responsible for the development of Individual Education Programs (IEP) for the students on their caseloads. The paperwork associated with special education has been identified throughout the literature as burdensome and tedious on special education teachers (Billingsly, 2004; Boe & Cook, 2006; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Major, 2012). These teachers all expressed a feeling that their administrators expected compliant paperwork completion, yet adequate time and training was not consistently provided. Several participants received some central office support for managing other clerical duties related to reevaluation and eligibility processes, yet all six teachers were the primary professional responsible for developing and progress monitoring the annual goals of each IEP on their caseloads.

The purpose of the IEP process is to identify current strengths and needs of students with disabilities and to develop measurable goals that provide students with disabilities meaningful access and progress in the school setting (IDEA, 2004). According to Friend (2014), the IEP goals should drive the services being provided to students with disabilities.

The expectation that special education teachers have solid documentation of the provision of special education services as prescribed by the IEP, in conjunction with relevant progress monitoring data for each IEP goal was a focal point of the latest Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017). Prior to *Andrew*, special education litigation focused primarily on procedural compliance with a lower set of expected outcomes for student progress. In the wake of *Andrew*, school districts must continue to meet procedural compliance in addition to raising the bar for expected student progress and outcomes as a result of special education services. The descriptions of the day-to-day practices of these six participants reveal special educators spend most of their instructional time remediating the general core content of their general education colleagues or performing other tasks not specifically related to the IEP. For example, several of the participants described being asked to cover a general education class or being asked to deal with student discipline during times they were supposed to be providing special education services. The practice of having special educators to perform duties outside of his or her job description has become so common that many of these participants appear to prioritize these activities over those they were originally hired to do. In fact, several of the participants expressed frustration with being expected to progress monitor IEP goals for the students they serve. Given that all six participants were licensed through traditional methods and described their preparation programs as providing them with a solid foundation in special education regulations and IEP development, the data gathered reveals a change in practice and beliefs about what their perceived role. This is an example of how ideal and practices are socially constructed.

### **Theme Three: “Jack of All Trades and Master of None”**

Educating society’s youth is a very demanding job for all teachers. Special education teachers are expected to be highly trained in understanding the diverse needs of students with disabilities, curricular content knowledge, appropriate instructional planning, strategies, assessment, ethical practice, and effective collaboration with a variety of stakeholders (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017a). Balancing these responsibilities with the compliant clerical aspects that accompany the expected duties of special education teachers may be a contributing factor to an increased burnout and teacher turnover rates (Brunsting, Sreckovic & Lane, 2014; Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry & McGinley, 2011). Many of the participants in this research expressed frustration with trying to perform so many different types of activities within a school day and described a feeling of insufficient performance and the need for more time to accomplish all that is expected of them as a result (Mrs. Maddie, Mrs. Black, Ms. Taylor, and Mrs. Defeo).

Specific to this theme, the majority of participants in this study compared her or his duties to that of general education colleagues. In the high school setting, most general education colleagues teach one subject with a limited number of preparations per day. The participants recognized that general educators may serve larger numbers of students, but the amount of planning required is dramatically less given the focus on only one subject area. The data from this research revealed similar struggles that secondary special educators face with regard to the number of preparations and multi-subject curricular knowledge required to teach secondary students with mild or high incidence disabilities (Washburn- Moses, 2005; Washburn-Moses & Bouck, 2007). Like most secondary education models, special education teachers often attempt to compartmentalize their roles

and specialize in one subject area or another; however, all six of these participants expressed concerns with being able logistically to effectively case manage their students and focus on only one or two subject areas. In all six cases, these participants shared regular expectations that involve duties outside their job descriptions such as counseling students with personal problems, personally providing basic sustenance (food and clothing), or assisting with post-secondary employment and training guidance.

#### **Theme Four: Special Educator as Subordinate to General Educator**

The final common theme revealed in this research was an overall perceived feeling of being viewed as having less professional status as compared with general education teachers with congruent degrees, professional training, and equivalent compensation for the same years of experience within the same state pay scale. In their research on status of special educators in the field, Kusuma-Powell and Powell (2016) made a comparison to how students with disabilities continue to be devalued by both society and the institution of public education, and the similarity of a perceived lower professional status of the special education teachers who serve these students. All six of the participants in this study described either current or previous experiences in which they felt their role was subordinate to their general education colleagues. For example, they would be asked to stop instruction to cover a general education colleague's class or they would be assigned additional non-instructional duties because they had fewer students to serve each day.

Several of the participants in this research felt that they were fully respected by their current colleagues and administrators. However, the language they used to describe their current realities suggest that they are not as valued or respected as they reported. For example, throughout his description of his professed favorite co-teaching assignments, Mr.

Allen continually stated that his general education colleagues “let me teach in their class”. Likewise, when discussing supportive administration, Mrs. Maddie stated that her administration said, “I don’t care if what we do is inconvenient for the adults, we are going to do what is best for students.” Yet, Mrs. Maddie also stated that she and her special education colleagues draw straws when the schedule has a co-teaching assignment with an uncooperative or resistant general education teacher. The language they use to construct meaning of their professional roles may be evolving based on their perceived status and how they continue to negotiate conflicting interests within the field of special education.

### **Unique Theme**

One unique theme emerged from Mrs. Walter’s case. She is the only participant in this study who described providing research-based reading intervention to the students she serves. According the CEC (2017) and Simonsen et. al. (2010), special educators must be highly trained interventionists, utilizing research-based and high-leverage instructional approaches to address the academic and functional needs that result from a student’s disability. Mrs. Walters was the only participant who was able to identify and describe how she regularly uses a research-based approach to target the individual reading needs of her students. Additionally, she was able to explain individual student progress as it related to the IEP goals she had developed. The other participants responses to questions posed on how they operationalize, define, and provide specially designed instruction were vague and referred back to strategies or accommodations that were based on the general core curriculum. When asked what specific academic interventions that they had been trained in, most of the participants stated that there were no specific academic intervention programs to address high school students.

## **Case Alignment with the CEC Professional Standards for Special Educators**

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is a professional organization that utilizes research in the field of special education, coupled with the guiding principles set forth in the IDEA regulations to set the standard for ethical and professional practices and preparation for special education teachers. There are seven initial preparation standards for special educators that were used to help frame my analysis of the data gathered in this research. A detailed list and description of each of these standards can be located in Appendix H. The interview questions and conversations did not include reference to the CEC standards, as I sought natural and authentic responses from each participant. It is important to note that the research questions and analysis do not align with every sub-standard of the professional standards and does not imply that the participant does or does not exhibit such behaviors within his or her comprehensive professional performance.

Comparing each participant's work schedule, narrative and interview responses to CEC professional standards for special educators varied these participants. Data gathered was coded with the standard number if applicable. For example, when a teacher described planning an activity that aligned with a particular student's reading level or tailoring a writing prompt to a student's interest, then this was coded as Standard One: Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences. The following table (Table 7) represents the how data gathered from each participant aligns with each of the CEC standards. In Table 7 (below), the participants' data was categorized by most, some, and least alignment to the descriptors of each standard.

Table 7

*Data Analysis Compared to CEC Professional Standards*

CEC Standards	Most Alignment	Some Alignment	Least Alignment
Standard 1: Learner Development & Individual Learning Differences	Mrs. Walters Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo		Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie
Standard 2: Learning Environments	Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie Mrs. Walters	Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo	
Standard 3: Curricular Content Knowledge	Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie Mrs. Walters Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo		
Standard 4: Assessment	Mrs. Walters		Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo
Standard 5: Instructional Planning & Strategies	Mrs. Walters	Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie	Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo
Standard 6: Professional Learning & Ethical Practice	Mrs. Walters	Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor Mrs. Defeo	
Standard 7: Collaboration	Mr. Allen Mrs. Maddie Mrs. Walters Mrs. Defeo	Mrs. Black Ms. Taylor	

The data gathered revealed most of the participants had stronger alignment with factors associated with Standard 3: Curricular Content Knowledge. This supports their emphasis on remediating the general content. The majority of these participant's data revealed lesser alignment with Standard 4: Assessment. It was important to explore and compare the data gathered with these standards to examine how the daily role activities align with the fundamental expectations of professional organization that guides this field.

### **Implications for Practice**

Preparing students for college and career is a common mission for most public schools across this nation. Accountability standards established by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continues the expectation that all students will graduate high school prepared for college or career (White House, 2015). In an effort to meet these requirements, schools must ensure that they are staffing highly qualified educators to prepare our youth for post-secondary success. Given the subpar academic outcomes for students with disabilities as compared with their non-disabled peers (US Department of Education, 2016) and the shortage of qualified special education teachers (Boe & Cook, 2006), further research is needed within the field of special education.

The results of this study suggest that expectations and practices among secondary special education teachers, with similar assignments in this state vary greatly depending on the school and community for which they work and live. While many of these teachers experience common perceptions about their role in the school setting, their actual duties appear to be constructed by the expectations of their general education colleagues and supervisors. According to Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010), there appears to be a “blurring of special education” between a more clinical prescriptive service and an



embedded support model. Such vast differences in the expectations of teachers with similar assignments may be a contributing factor to the increase in burnout rates for special educators, which in turn may be negatively impacting the educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Increase professional development for all educators.** It is evident in the data collected from this study that there is a need for quality and on-going professional development tailored to the needs of all stakeholders, specific to the purpose and provision of special education. Administrators who supervise special education teachers and overall school programs receive very little pre-service or on the job professional development in the area of special education (Streinbrecher et al., 2015; Wakeman et al., 2006).

Additionally, increasing professional development opportunities for general education teachers on their role in educating students with disabilities is needed to improve services and collaboration within the educational institution (Friend, 2014; Raymond, 2017).

Several of the participants from this research shared that they believe the deflated view of general education colleagues is a result of a lack of understanding and training in special education for this group of educators.

On-going professional development for special education teachers is equally important. Changes in legislation and practice as a result of expanding litigation in the field of special education, requires school districts to continually research and train staff on all aspects of the field (Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011; Sakallı Gümüş, 2015; Simonsen et al., 2010; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). Special education teachers have an expansive role in the school setting; their duties are as diverse as the students they serve, which requires focused and quality professional development tailored to their unique needs (Urbach et al., 2015).

All six participants shared similar experiences with regard to the professional development offered to them. Most of these teachers receive district led professional development specific to compliant paperwork processes. With the exception of two teachers, participants expressed limited knowledge or training on research-based instructional approaches to meet the academic or functional needs of the students they serve.

Likewise, it is imperative that school administrators receive on-going training in the provision of specially designed instruction and how to best support and supervise special educators. According to Steinbrecher et al. (2014) and Wakeman et al. (2006), school administrators are less likely to have background or extensive training in special education, making it difficult to understand the specific roles and the professional strengths and needs of their special education staff. Lack of support and unclear professional expectations could be a contributing factor in high attrition rates of special education teachers (Boe & Cook, 2006).

**Scheduling special education services at the secondary level.** One common challenge identified by all of the participants was meeting the needs of students within a typical high school schedule. The master schedule at the high school appeared to influence every aspect of how these participants performed their professional duties. Additionally, the master schedule of the school seemed to drive how goals and services were developed for IEPs, rather than the individual needs of the students. A review of the literature reveals that scheduling at the secondary level varies between schools, districts, and states which can complicate how special education services are provided to students with disabilities (Urbach et al., 2015; Vannest & Hagen-Burke, 2010; Washburn-Moses, 2005). More research is needed to explore various scheduling models that promote flexibility for

addressing the needs of all students, while effectively managing the workloads of all teachers.

**Clarify role descriptions and job duties of special educators.** The data gathered in this research, along with missing data specific to the job description of these participants reveals a lack of specificity clearly defining the professional role expectations. Most of the participants provided a very generic job description that did not closely align with the duties they performed each day. Likewise, the interview questions/processes that most of the participants recalled did not align with daily duties they were expected to perform. Additionally, the specific duties and expectations of these teachers have changed as a result of district initiatives and/or changes in administration and staff. Research in field reveals that role confusion; in addition to excessive workloads may be a contributing factor to the increase of burnout rates for special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Boe & Cook, 2006; Brusting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Major, 2012).

The duties of special education teachers are diverse and vary depending on the ages and needs of the students they teach. Developing specific job descriptions for the type of special education position and school level would provide clarity to all school stakeholders. As initiatives or expectations change, so should the job description along with training on the changes. When hiring new staff, interview questions and processes should closely align with the specific job description. Likewise, evaluation criteria should be based on the specific job duties. Such practices should minimize ambiguity within the professional environment.

**Incongruence between policy and practice.** The final implication reveals a possible incongruence between policy and practice. The literature reviewed exemplifies a

diverse philosophic view of how to best educate students with disabilities. The design of pre-service training for special educators, coupled with differing professional licensing methods, and the contrasting interpretations of federal and state regulations can contribute to conflicting practice within the field (Leko et al., 2015). In each of the six cases, the participating teachers shared examples of how their practice did not always mirror the policies that govern special education services in their state. They emphasized the importance of compliance and regulatory policies, yet circumstances beyond their control impacted their ability to consistently perform within the established guidelines. This is an important aspect for policy makers to understand. While the regulations are in place to provide a meaningful free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities; there may be contradicting policies that put educators in a position to misinterpret regulatory statutes and implement practices that conflict with differing policies. An examination of all the regulations that impact the provision of services for students with disabilities is needed to improve quality programs for students and minimize legal liabilities for educators and school districts.

The results and implications provided in this research will serve as a guide in my own professional role as a special education director. I discovered the need for clear and concise job descriptions that match the various special education roles within my own school district. Additionally, I plan to use these results to plan more effective professional development opportunities for school administrators, special education providers, and general education teachers. Finally, findings from both the literature and this research provide a basis for redesigning my districts recruitment, induction, and retention practices for special education providers.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this research was to gather participant perceptions of their professional role. A multiple case study approach promoted deep insights from the study participants. In order to broaden understanding of all factors that influence role perception, gathering role perceptions from other stakeholders, such as school administrators or general education teachers would provide more insight on this phenomenon.

Another suggestion for future research would be to examine the purpose of special education programs and services for students with mild disabilities at the secondary level. The current practices that were revealed in this study indicate a shared belief that the focus of services should be on general curriculum assistance, rather than skill specific intervention. We must explore the post-secondary outcomes for this group of students and determine whether or not our current practices are preparing students for post school success.

Finally, a more critical examination of how our society continues to marginalize students with disabilities, and possibly the teachers who predominantly serve them, may be warranted in order to bring awareness of this continued bias in our public schools. As a classically trained special educator, I have witnessed firsthand this often unconscious, but prevalent prejudice for persons with disabilities, as well as those who educate them. This research also highlighted perceptions of special educators who feel subordinate to their general education colleagues. This phenomenon is a clear example of the social influences on the institution of public education.

## **Conclusion**

The teaching profession is rewarding, challenging, and dynamic. Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is becoming more difficult for school districts across the nation. Special education teachers have different, but equally important roles in the educational community. More research is needed to identify ways to clarify and streamline their roles into a more manageable and respected position, while expanding the understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all educators in the education of students with disabilities. With regard to the legal requirements of IDEA, general education teachers need more training to fully understand and fulfill their responsibilities in educating students with disabilities. Likewise, more research is warranted in the congruence of policies and the practices within the field of special education, particularly at the secondary level for services provided to students with high incidence or mild disabilities. Given the current practices and subpar outcomes for students with disabilities, one must question what is so special about special education at the secondary level.

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## Appendix A

### Research Timeline

November 2017	Submission of Dissertation Proposal
December 2017	Request for IRB Approval from ASU
January 2018	Recruitment of participants & obtain consent Written approval of each participating school districts
February 2018	Scheduling of first participant interview Artifact Protocol sent to each participant
Spring 2018	Conduct first participant interviews Conduct general professional setting observations Gather participant artifacts Transcribe audio recordings of interviews Begin data analysis and coding Conduct follow-up interviews Draft initial findings Share initial findings with each participant for validation Draft chapters four and five Collaborate with Dissertation Committee on final draft
Summer 2018	Submit final draft Dissertation to Doctoral Program

## Appendix B

### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Request

TO: Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board  
FROM: Amy E. Ashbrook-Wilson, Doctoral Student  
DATE: November 18, 2017  
SUBJECT: ASU- IRB Application Cover Memo for Proposed Study

The following IRB application is for a proposed research study titled, *Constructing the Role of the Secondary Special Educator*, as part of my doctoral dissertation. This research will utilize a qualitative multiple case study to explore the perceived professional roles of secondary special educators who serve students with mild or high incidence disabilities. This research will involve interviews with purposefully selected secondary special educators from across one state in the southeastern region of the United States. Additional data gathered will include job descriptions, teacher work schedules, and participant narratives describing examples of professional experiences that support and conflict with their perceived role expectations.

This research focuses on teachers of students with high incidence disabilities, also known as mild disabilities, and who are pursuing a regular high school diploma. The purpose of this research is to understand the perceived roles of these secondary special educators, how they developed their role perceptions, and how their role perception determine their job functions.

The data gathered from this study will be coded, analyzed, and organized around the following primary research question and sub questions that follow.

The primary research question follows: What are the perceived roles of secondary special education teachers who serve students with high incidence disabilities and how do these educators' role perceptions contribute to their work practices and day-to-day work choices with students and fellow teachers?

Sub questions are the following:

1. How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?
2. To what or whom do special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?



3. How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and work practices to those learned in their educator preparation programs?
4. Is there a difference between how special educators define their own roles and how they perceive their colleagues to define the teaching roles for them?
5. What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?

Each interview will begin with a semi-structured protocol to gather basic professional training and experience information. Afterwards, open-ended questions designed to answer the above research question and sub questions will follow. The initial interviews will be conducted in person with each participant in his or her work setting. Any follow-up interviews focused on clarification of the initial interview will be conducted virtually. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

The artifact review protocol will include an analysis of such documents as job descriptions, daily work schedules, and narrative samples describing both exemplar and contrasting professional experiences. The analysis of these artifacts will include comparing these documents with the key elements of the seven standards of highly qualified special education teachers, developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

The data collection for this study will involve collection of artifacts and direct interviews with participants. I will assign each school, district, and participant a pseudonym that will be used in the coding of all research data and subsequent written reports. There is little risk to breach of confidentiality or anonymity. All research data, including personal and organizational identity keys, will be kept in a personal, secure and locked location during the study and will remain there for up to five years from the final date of the dissertation report. At the end of five years, the secured materials will be destroyed.

## Appendix C

### Sample Participant Recruitment Letter

November 20, 2017

Dear (participant name),

My name is Amy Ashbrook-Wilson and I am currently completing my Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership from Appalachian State University. I am writing you to request your partnership in my research study titled *Constructing the Role of the Secondary Special Educator*. Your district was selected as a potential site for secondary special education teachers who primarily serve students with high incidence disabilities pursuing a regular high school diploma. As a current special education director in this state, I understand the professional commitments of all educators and will respect your time and will structure participation in this research in a minimally intrusive way. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and participants may wish to withdraw consent at anytime.

I am conducting qualitative multiple case studies that are designed to explore how secondary special education teachers, serving students with high incidence disabilities, perceive and construct their professional roles in the high school setting. My research explores how special education teachers form their understandings of their jobs. I am particularly interested in how each participant's professional training, collaboration with colleagues and supervisors, and daily professional experiences impact how they perceive their professional identity. My research questions are:

1. How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?
2. To what or whom do special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?
3. How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and practices at work to those learned in their educator preparation programs?
4. Is there a difference between how special educators define their roles as compared to how they perceive their colleagues to define their roles?
5. What is the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?

The data collection protocol will include the following:

- Individual interviews (audio recorded and later transcribed) with up to six currently practicing secondary special education teachers who serve students with high incidence disabilities pursuing a regular high school diploma; and
- Collection of each participant's current job description; and
- A current resume or list of professional training and experiences from each participant; and
- A short narrative from each participant that describes a professional experience which adequately reflects the perception of your current role, as well as, an example of a professional experience that did not align with the perceived role; and
- General observations made by the researcher during initial interviews at the professional setting of each participant.

This research is designed to be minimally intrusive to all participants. I will conduct the initial interviews in person at your professional location (school). I anticipate that the initial interview will last approximately one to two hours. Prior to the initial interview, I will send an artifact protocol that contains a list of supporting documents I would like to review. There could be a request for follow-up interviews to clarify information from the initial interview using a conferencing platform like Skype or Zoom that you find to be suitable.

At the conclusion of the study, I will be glad to share all of aggregate results and provide a copy of my completed dissertation. I am providing you with my contact information, in addition to the contact information of my faculty advisor and dissertation chair, and the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board. Should you have any concerns or questions, feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Amy E. Ashbrook- Wilson, Ed. S.

[wilsonael@appstate.edu](mailto:wilsonael@appstate.edu)

828.244.2306

1001 Tangle Drive, Hickory, NC 28602

Dissertation Chair-Dr. Roma Angel; [angelrb@appstate.edu](mailto:angelrb@appstate.edu)

## Appendix D

### Sample Consent Form

#### **Constructing the Role of the Secondary Special Educator**

Principal Investigator: Amy E. Ashbrook-Wilson, Graduate Student

Department: Educational Leadership

Contact Information: [wilsonae1@appstate.edu](mailto:wilsonae1@appstate.edu); 828.244.2306

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Roma Angel, [angelrb@appstate.edu](mailto:angelrb@appstate.edu); 828-260-0368

#### **Consent to Participate in Research**

##### *Information to Consider About this Research*

I agree to participate as an interviewee in this research project, which will attempt to better understand how secondary special educators serving students with high incidence disabilities perceive and construct their professional role within the high school setting. The initial interview will take place at the interviewee's work location and should last no more than two hours. Any clarifying follow-up interviews will be conducted electronically through platforms such as Skype or Zoom and will also be audio recorded. I understand the interview will focus on my perceived professional role pertaining to educating students with mild or high incidence disabilities at the high school level. I also understand that this study may add to the pool of research in the field.

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with my participation. I further understand that my identity will be protected through an assigned pseudonym; this pseudonym will bear no resemblance to my given name or other characteristics associated with me.

I understand that the interview(s) will be audio recorded and information obtained from these recordings may be published. I understand that the audio recordings of my interview will only be used for this research study if I sign the authorization below. Following transcription, all audio recordings will be destroyed. All research materials will be kept in a personal locked and secure location for five years.

I give Amy E. Ashbrook-Wilson ownership of the tapes, transcripts, and recordings from the interview(s) she conducts with me and understand that tapes and transcripts will be kept in secure locked personal location. I understand that information or quotations from the recordings and/or transcripts will be included and published in the final dissertation. I understand I will not receive compensation for the interview.

I understand that the interview is voluntary and there are no consequences if I choose not to participate. I also understand that I do not have to answer all questions and can end the interview at any time with no consequences. I may opt-in or opt-out of allowing my interview to be included in the study.

If I have questions about this research project, I can call Amy E. Ashbrook-Wilson, the primary investigator, at 828.244.2306 or Dr. Roma Angel, the faculty advisor, at 828-260-0368.

Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board has determined this study to be exempt from IRB oversight.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have read this form, had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers, and want to participate. I understand I can keep a copy for my records.

---

Participant's Name (PRINT)

---

Signature

Date

***Opt-in/Opt-out Clause***

I understand that all data collected will not include identifiable information such as participant names, school or LEA names, etc. Participation is voluntary.

\_\_\_\_\_ I choose to have my quotes (anonymous) be used in the research report.  
(Initials)

\_\_\_\_\_ I choose not to have my quotes (anonymous) be used in the research report.  
(Initials)

## Appendix E

### Sample Request Letters of Agreement from Participating School Systems/Districts

January 2018

To the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB):

I am familiar with Amy Ashbrook Wilson's research project entitled *Constructing the Role of the Secondary Special Educator*. [**LEA names**] agrees to support this research by allowing Amy Ashbrook-Wilson, the primary researcher, to interview secondary special educators who have voluntarily consented to participate in her study. In addition, [LEA NAME] understand that participants will provide Ms. Ashbrook-Wilson with professional artifacts that are not confidential in nature (i.e. teacher schedule, resume or list of professional training & experiences, narrative description of professional experiences, job descriptions, and participant recalled job interview questions, as available to the participant).

As the research team conducts this research project I understand and agree that:

- This research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that it has been approved by the IRB at Appalachian State University.
- Employee participation in this project is strictly voluntary and not a condition of employment at [**LEA name**]. There are no contingencies for employees who choose to participate or decline to participate in this project. There will be no adverse employment consequences as a result of an employee's participation in this study.
- To the extent confidentiality may be protected under State or Federal law, the data collected will remain confidential, as described in the protocol. The names of your district and participating schools will **not be** reported in the results of the study. Pseudonyms will be used for all organizations.

Therefore, as a representative of [**LEA name**], I agree that Amy Ashbrook Wilson's research project may be conducted at our school/district, and that she may assure participants that they may participate in interviews and provide professional artifacts and information without adverse employment consequences.

Sincerely,

[*name & title of agency/institutional authority*]

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol

#### I. Initial Interview Process

Once participants are selected and consent to participate in this study, the researcher will schedule initial interviews with each participant to be conducted as his or her place of employment at mutually convenient time for the participant and researcher.

Initial in-person interviews are anticipated to last no more than one hour. All interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. The researcher will keep notes during the interview as well. All notes and transcriptions will be coded and analyzed.

The questions below are aligned with the research questions. The researcher will complete the demographic information on all participants prior to asking the first set of questions. Follow-up or clarification questions may be asked if needed.

#### II. Demographic Information for all Participants:

Gender: \_\_\_ Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_ Prefer not answer

Race: \_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_ Black \_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_ Multi-Racial \_\_\_ Native American  
\_\_\_ Pacific Islander \_\_\_ White \_\_\_ Prefer not to answer

Age Range: \_\_\_ Under 30 \_\_\_ 31-40 \_\_\_ 41-50 \_\_\_ 51-60 \_\_\_ 61 or Over

#### III. Local Education Agency (LEA)/Public School Demographics

Region: \_\_\_ Northeast \_\_\_ Southeast \_\_\_ Piedmont/Triad \_\_\_ Northwest \_\_\_  
Southwest

LEA/Community Type: \_\_\_ Rural \_\_\_ Suburban \_\_\_ Urban (large city)

Size of Current LEA/School District: \_\_\_ Small (<5,000 students) \_\_\_ Medium (5,001-  
25,000 students)  
\_\_\_ Large (>25,001 students)

Size of Current High School (School based participants only): \_\_\_ Small (<750 students)  
\_\_\_ Medium (751-1500 students) \_\_\_ Large (>1501 students)

#### **IV. Participant's Professional Background**

1. What is your current position?
2. How many years of experience have you had in your current position?
3. What type of degree do you hold and in what field?
4. Through which type of method did you obtain your current teaching license (traditional, alternative, etc.)
5. How many years of classroom teaching experience in public schools do you have?
6. Do you have experience in public education outside of this state? If yes, where?
7. Describe your training and experience in your current position?

#### **V. Research Specific Questions**

1. What types of training or professional development have you received regarding the provision of special education services?
2. Describe your job or role as a secondary special education teacher?
3. What do you like most about your job?
4. What do you like least about your job?
5. What does it mean to be a special education teacher?
6. Describe what a typical school day looks like for you?
7. In a perfect world, describe what a typical day would look like for you as a secondary special educator?
8. What would you change, if anything, about your professional role?
9. IDEA states that students who are eligible for special education services must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and receive specially designed instruction. How do you define or operationalize specially designed instruction?
10. What do you believe your general education teacher colleagues perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?
11. What do you believe your school administrator/supervisor perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?
12. Did your pre-service training prepare you for your current professional role? How so or why not?
13. Has your professional practice changed as a result of expectations of other colleagues or your supervisor? If so, please describe how.
14. Why did you choose to teach special education at the high school level?
15. What challenges do you face in your current position?
16. Are you satisfied with your career choice? Why or why not?



## Appendix G

### Participant Artifact Request Protocol

The purpose of this study is to better understand how current secondary special educators perceive and construct what it means to be a special education teacher of students with mild disabilities at the high school level. The collection of the artifacts from each participant will be requested prior to the initial in-person interview. This will allow the researcher to review the artifacts and clarify any questions about each artifact with the participant.

In an effort to highlight each participant's perceptions regarding his or her professional role, the research is requesting the following documents/artifacts from each participant:

- A current resume or list of professional training and experience from each participant; and
- A current daily schedule of duties from each participant (redacting any confidential information such as student or colleague names, etc.); and
- A written job description provided by each participant (which could be obtained from the school/district, or could be developed by the participant); and
- A list of recalled questions used during the participant's interview for his or her current position; and
- A brief narrative response to the prompt below.

#### *Narrative Prompt:*

Write about one professional experience that aligns with how you perceive your professional role. In other words, describe a professional experience that exemplifies what it means to be a secondary special education teacher. Next, write about one professional experience that did not align with what you perceive to be your professional role. In other words, what duties or activities did you perform that is not part of what you believe is a secondary special education teacher's professional role. Briefly explain why you believe each experience was clearly aligned or not to your professional role.

## Appendix H

### CEC Professional Standards for Initial Special Educator Preparation

As detailed in the 2015 CEC publication: *What Every Special Educator Must Know: Professional Ethics & Standards* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) pp. 22-28.

#### **Initial Preparation Standard 1: Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences**

1.0	Beginning special education professionals understand how exceptionalities may interact with development and learning and use this knowledge to provide meaningful and challenging learning experiences for individuals with exceptionalities.
1.1	Beginning special education professionals understand how language, culture, and family background influence the learning of individuals with exceptionalities.
1.2	Beginning special education professionals use understanding of development and individual differences to respond to the needs of individuals with exceptionalities

#### **Initial Preparation Standard 2: Learning Environments**

2.0	Beginning special education professionals create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments so that individuals with exceptionalities become active and effective learners and develop emotional well being, positive social interactions, and self-determination.
2.1	Beginning special education professionals, through collaboration with general educators and other colleagues, create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to engage individuals with exceptionalities in meaningful learning activities and social interactions.
2.2	Beginning special education professionals use motivational and instructional interventions to teach individuals with exceptionalities how to adapt to different environments.
2.3	Beginning special education professionals know how to intervene safely and appropriately with individuals with exceptionalities in crisis.

#### **Initial Preparation Standard 3: Curricular Content Knowledge**

3.0	Beginning special education professionals use knowledge of general and specialized curricula to individualize learning for individuals with exceptionalities.
3.1	Beginning special education professionals understand the central concepts, structures of the discipline, and tools of inquiry of the content areas they teach, and can organize this knowledge, integrate cross-disciplinary skills, and

	develop meaningful learning progressions for individuals with exceptionalities.
3.2	Beginning special education professionals understand and use general and specialized content knowledge for teaching across curricular content areas to individualize learning for individuals with exceptionalities.
3.3	Beginning special education professionals modify general and specialized curricula to make them accessible to individuals with exceptionalities.

#### **Initial Preparation Standard 4: Assessment**

4.0	Beginning special education professionals use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making educational decisions.
4.1	Beginning special education professionals select and use technically sound formal and informal assessments that minimize bias.
4.2	Beginning special education professionals use knowledge of measurement principles and practices to interpret assessment results and guide educational decisions for individuals with exceptionalities.
4.3	Beginning special education professionals, in collaboration with colleagues and families, use multiple types of assessment information in making decisions about individuals with exceptionalities.
4.4	Beginning special education professionals engage individuals with exceptionalities to work toward quality learning and performance and provide feedback to guide them.

#### **Initial Preparation Standard 5: Instructional Planning and Strategies**

5.0	Beginning special education professionals select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of individuals with exceptionalities.
5.1	Beginning special education professionals consider individual abilities, interests, learning environments, and cultural and linguistic factors in the selection, development, and adaptation of learning experiences for individuals with exceptionalities.
5.2	Beginning special education professionals use technologies to support instructional assessment, planning, and delivery for individuals with exceptionalities.
5.3	Beginning special education professionals are familiar with augmentative and alternative communication systems and a variety of assistive technologies to support the communication and learning of individuals with exceptionalities.
5.4	Beginning special education professionals use strategies to enhance language development and communication skills of individuals with exceptionalities.
5.5	Beginning special education professionals develop and implement a variety of education and transition plans for individuals with exceptionalities across a wide range of settings and different learning experiences in collaboration with individuals, families, and teams.

5.6	Beginning special education professionals teach to mastery and promote generalization of learning.
5.7	Beginning special education professionals teach cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills such as critical thinking and problem solving to individuals with exceptionalities.

**Initial Preparation Standard 6: Professional Learning and Ethical Practice**

6.0	Beginning special education professionals use foundational knowledge of the field and their professional ethical principles and practice standards to inform special education practice, to engage in lifelong learning, and to advance the profession.
6.1	Beginning special education professionals use professional ethical principles and professional practice standards to guide their practice.
6.2	Beginning special education professionals understand how foundational knowledge and current issues influence professional practice.
6.3	Beginning special education professionals understand that diversity is a part of families, cultures, and schools, and that complex human issues can interact with the delivery of special education services.
6.4	Beginning special education professionals understand the significance of lifelong learning and participate in professional activities and learning communities.
6.5	Beginning special education professionals advance the profession by engaging in activities such as advocacy and mentoring.
6.6	Beginning special education professionals provide guidance and direction to paraeducators, tutors, and volunteers.

**Initial Preparation Standard 7: Collaboration**

7.0	Beginning special education professionals collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, individuals with exceptionalities, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of individuals with exceptionalities across a range of learning experiences.
7.1	Beginning special education professionals use the theory and elements of effective collaboration.
7.2	Beginning special education professionals serve as a collaborative resource to colleagues.
7.3	Beginning special education professionals use collaboration to promote the well being of individuals with exceptionalities across a wide range of settings and collaborators.

## Appendix I

### Research Data Collection/Analysis Protocol

Research Question	Interview Questions	Other Data Sources
<p>What are the professional background and experiences of secondary special education teachers serving students with high incidence disabilities?</p> <p>(Participant and district demographics/background)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is your current position?</li> <li>▪ How many years of experience have you had in your current position?</li> <li>▪ What type of degree do you hold and in what field?</li> <li>▪ Through which type of method did you obtain your current teaching license (traditional, alternative, etc.)</li> <li>▪ How many years of classroom teaching experience in public schools do you have?</li> <li>▪ Do you have experience in public education outside of this state? If yes, where?</li> </ul> <p>Describe your training and experience in your current position?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Current resume or list of professional training and experiences provided by each participant</li> <li>▪ District demographic information</li> <li>▪ Graduation Cohort data by school</li> </ul>
<p>How do secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities define their roles?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Describe your job or role as a special education teacher?</li> <li>▪ Describe what a typical school day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Job Descriptions provided by each participant-compared to the CEC Standards &amp; NC DPI EC Teacher</li> </ul>

<p>(Professional Role Description)</p>	<p>looks like for you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What does it mean to be a special education teacher?</li> <li>▪ What do you like most about your job?</li> <li>▪ What do you like least about your job?</li> <li>▪ What challenges do you face in your current position?</li> <li>▪ Are you satisfied with your career choice? Why or why not?</li> </ul>	<p>Job Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ General observation of each participant's professional setting/environment</li> <li>▪ Participant Daily Work Schedules</li> </ul>
<p>To what or whom do special education teachers of students with mild disabilities attribute their understanding of their role in the high school setting?</p> <p>(Role Construction)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In a perfect world, describe what a typical day would look like for you as a secondary special educator?</li> <li>▪ What would you change, if anything, about your professional role?</li> <li>▪ IDEA states that students who are eligible for special education services must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and receive specially designed instruction. How do you define or operationalize specially designed instruction?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Narrative Essays provided by each participant describing both a positive and negative professional experience in his or her current role-compared with CEC standards and job descriptions provided</li> <li>▪ Participants Daily Work Schedules</li> </ul>

<p>How do secondary special education teachers compare their current roles and practices at work to those learned in their educator preparation programs?</p> <p>(Role Preparation &amp; Development)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Why did you choose to teach special education at the high school level?</li> <li>▪ How did your pre-service training prepare you for your current professional role? How so or why not? Are there aspects of your role that you weren't prepared for?</li> <li>▪ What types of training or professional development have you received regarding the provision of special education services?</li> </ul>	
<p>Is there a difference between how special educators define their roles as compared to how they perceive their colleagues to define their role in educating students with disabilities?</p> <p>(Differing Role Perspectives)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What do you believe your general education teacher colleagues perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?</li> <li>▪ What do you believe your school administrator/supervisor perceive as your role as a special educator? Why?</li> <li>▪ Has your professional practice changed as a result of expectations of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ List of questions each participant recalls that was used in the interview for her or his current position</li> <li>▪ General observation of each participant's professional setting/environment</li> <li>▪ Participants Daily Work Schedules</li> </ul>

	other colleagues or your supervisor? If so, please describe how.	
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## **Vita**

Amy Ellen Ashbrook Wilson was born in Bristol, Tennessee, to Daniel (Eddy) and Susan Ashbrook. She graduated from Lebanon High School in June 1990. She entered the University of Virginia- Wise in the summer of 1996 and graduated in May 1998 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and Sociology. She was chosen as a North Carolina Principal Fellow in 2002 and graduated with a Master of School Administration Degree from Appalachian State University in May 2004. She returned to college and completed her Education Specialist Degree at Appalachian State University in May 2012. Ms. Ashbrook Wilson commenced work toward her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University in August 2015. Ms. Ashbrook Wilson is a special education director in Newton, NC.