A Case Study of How Elementary Special Educators' Perspectives Influence Learning Opportunities Afforded to Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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A CASE STUDY OF HOW ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATORS’
PERSPECTIVES INFLUENCE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AFFORDED
TO STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

by

Shari Kay McCrary

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DEDICATION

This work is lovingly dedicated to my husband, my best friend, who taught me that even the largest task can be accomplished if it is done one step at a time. His caring support and encouragement provided the foundation for this journey.

To my daughters, who have always believed in me.

To my mother and brother, who have been my pillars of strength.

And, finally, this work is dedicated in memory of my father, who always believed his little girl could persevere to great accomplishments.
ABSTRACT

A CASE STUDY OF HOW ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATORS’ PERSPECTIVES INFLUENCE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AFFORDED TO STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

By Shari Kay McCrary

The purpose of this two-year qualitative case study was to explore how elementary special educators’ perspectives influence their curricular and instructional decision-making when engaged in the development of learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. In particular, this investigation focused on gaining a better understanding of educators’ willingness and/or ability to provide rich, relevant, and challenging curriculum to students with intellectual disabilities. The conceptual framework that undergirds this study finds its roots in a theory of social justice, guided by the work of Apple (1979, 1990), Freire (1970, 1998), and Cochran-Smith (2004, 2008). Data collection efforts center around four primary measures: in-depth biographical and open-ended interviews, observations, ideology surveys, and teachers’ collages. The study examines the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making as they are engaged in developing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?
R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

Findings suggest that teachers’ perspectives have a profound impact on classroom life, including curricular and instructional decision-making, resulting in significant implications for general and special education, teacher preparation, and issues related to social justice. The data reveal that teachers face numerous barriers when they attempt to provide equitable learning opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities, including lack of resources, challenging student behavior, scheduling issues, insufficient planning time, non-acceptance of students with significant intellectual disabilities in general education classrooms, difficulty level, reduction in level of teacher expectations, and teacher beliefs, assumptions, and biases. As a result, it may be inferred that teachers typically offer students with significant intellectual disabilities little, if any, opportunity to access the general education curriculum.

A major assertion of this study supports the notion that a continuum of instructional and curricular practices that embed a variety of social, functional (often off-grade level) academic, and daily living skills within activities and instruction using the general education curriculum are needed for students with intellectual disabilities. The
conclusions suggest that teachers and pre-service teachers may be able to ameliorate prejudices and/or biases through reflection and acknowledgment of their beliefs about students with intellectual disabilities and how their beliefs relate to practice and the professional knowledge base. Finally, programs that blend the general education curriculum with a functional curriculum can enhance equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The term “justice” can be elusive and subjective: consequently, it is prone to a range of interpretation. What do you think about when you think about justice? When I think about justice, I think about fairness. I think about having informal and formal processes where the means justify the ends, not the reverse. I think about equity. I think about having two children share the last chocolate chip cookie so one does not have to go without. I also think about proportionality. I think about whether one child did more to merit a larger share of the cookie. On a larger scale, I think about human rights, political freedom, and the absence of oppression. Whether justice is discussed on the large scale of human suffering, or on the small scale of how to divide the last cookie—justice is justice.

(Lusterbader, 2006, p. 613)

Justice is relevant in all contexts, especially in the context of teaching students with intellectual disabilities. All students have the basic human right to have access to equitable learning opportunities, such as allocation of resources and challenging curriculum. These opportunities evolve and unfold based on the present belief systems and principles that exist in our society and educational system. According to Carrier (1990), our knowledge and understanding of academic success and failure and ability and disability can be considered as cultural constructions. Gliedman, Roth, and Children
(1980) assert this is because the dominant group in a society defines the features of the culture that differentiate those who can and those who can’t.

Cultural understandings of difference are reflected not only in the beliefs and attitudes of people, but also in the reactions and behaviors of individuals. Our educational system is constructed to include some children and not others. For decades, this separation of students has meant that some children with individual deficits could not succeed in an ordinary educational system. This deficit perspective continues to exist in the current educational system and continues to influence society’s beliefs and assumptions relative to students with intellectual disabilities. “Deficit thinking can take on different forms to conform to what is politically acceptable at the moment, and while the popularity of different revisions may change, it never ceases to be important in determining school policy and practices” (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). Poplin (1988) contended that the deficit perspective continued to result in the emphasis of deficits over strengths and focus on the teaching of discrete, task analyzed skills in the absence of context, meaning, and relevance.

The majority of students with intellectual disabilities are taught in self-contained classrooms for a large portion of the school day. This separation of students has deflected emphasis from development of academic knowledge and skill attainment to functional knowledge and skill attainment. A functional curriculum focuses on basic skills using real life situations. In a functional curriculum, students are provided age appropriate instruction to assist them in performing tasks necessary to function in various environments or domains, including education, vocational, domestic, recreational-leisure, and communal. Functional curriculum, however, is just a small portion of the education
needed by students with intellectual disabilities. The literature suggests that this population can also benefit from access to the general education curriculum, which includes academics. Curricular and instructional decision-making focused solely on a functional curriculum presents a marginalized view of the child’s learning potential and also presents little opportunity for academic learning. Critics of a functional-only curriculum argue that it promotes a separate or segregated curriculum, producing an atypical school experience for those with intellectual disabilities. A functional curriculum is often taught prior to academic instruction based upon grade-level standards.

Current legislation and mandates represent major advancements in making certain that students with intellectual disabilities receive a high quality and individually-designed education. Legislative changes have been made to better ensure that students with disabilities have access to challenging curriculum. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) increased the intentionality of special education services to include improving the performance of students with disabilities by aligning special education services with national school improvement efforts that include standards, assessments, and accountability. Even with these provisions in place, curricula of students with intellectual disabilities are typically driven by their individualized education programs (IEP), which does focus solely on the general education curriculum needs (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Feretti & Eisenman, 2010; Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003). Instead, IEP goals and objectives for students with intellectual disabilities generally focus on functional curriculum. The only access to the general education standards for students with intellectual disabilities that is mandated is through alternate assessment as required by the student’s state. Given the goal of equity,
how can there be assurance that teachers are providing students with intellectual disabilities access to the general education curriculum? Currently, no specific standard curriculum is available to guide the instructional process in classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities.

The achievement of educational equity for students with intellectual disabilities requires a system that will eliminate the historical deficit perspective. According to Adams, Blumenfeld, Hackman, Peters, and Zuniga (2000), students need choices in education. They need educational environments where they are challenged, where they are believed to be able to learn, and where they are not doomed by the low expectations of others. The elimination of deficit thinking results in a classroom climate in which student learning is exemplified when new ideas are connected to what students already know and have experienced; when they are actively engaged in applying and testing their knowledge using real-world problems; when their learning is organized around clear, high goals with lots of practice in reaching them; and when they can use their own interests and strengths as springboards for learning (Carrington, 1999). There are limited research studies that examine equitable opportunities for learning that students with intellectual disabilities can access. The current study, therefore, aims to fill this gap and expand the emerging literature by examining teachers perspectives on the degree to which students with intellectual disabilities are able to learn, and how their perspectives influence the degree to which they provide learning opportunities that are equitable and comparable to their typical-developing peers (Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, & Karvonen, 2007; Soupuk, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007; Weheymer et al., 2003).
Connecting to the General Education Curriculum

Currently, a standard curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities does not exist, leaving access to the general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities to be determined by the individual classroom teachers. Teachers are typically left to depend upon prior experiences, beliefs, and assumptions around pedagogy when developing instruction. Teachers’ perspectives may or may not result in the provision of equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. One view is that students with intellectual disabilities need a curriculum that enhances their everyday functioning in society. This may be true, but at what point are teachers paralyzed in their ability to teach beyond a functional curriculum? Teachers are required to provide instruction that addresses the goals and objectives developed in each student’s IEP. The goals and objectives developed for students with intellectual disabilities are typically driven by a functional curriculum fostered by deficit thinking and lowered expectations. The current study is framed around this problem as are the overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?
R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities.

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations – i.e. perspectives – of special education teachers relative to their propensity for ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, as embodied by their pedagogical practice. This study addressed a population that is often misunderstood and marginalized. It aimed to provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide students with intellectual disabilities rich, relevant, and challenging academic curricula that transcend traditionally delivered functional curricula.

This two-year study was conducted to illustrate how special education teachers perceive their everyday lives in the classroom and school environment. The participants reflected on the teaching and learning opportunities they facilitated in their classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities. They also deliberated on the resources they were currently able to access and those they desired. Teacher reflection provided a window into perspectives teachers held and the effect these perspectives had on their practice, such as curricular and instructional decision-making. Such understandings were key to this investigation, as they provided critical links to factors that enhanced or
impeded learning opportunities of substance, excellence, and equity to students with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, it appeared that encouraging teachers to reflect on their ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations was quite timely, based on our nation’s call for educational reform to ensure that students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities received a high quality education. Lipsky and Gartner (1989) asserted that educational restructuring began with the way children were viewed, how they were valued, and what was expected of them. Examining the everyday work lives and perspectives of the special education classroom teachers in this study provided a window through which we viewed the essence of teaching for social justice by way of ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it can be used as an avenue to invoke awareness of the educational marginalization of students with intellectual disabilities both within and outside the educational context. This study can also illuminate how such awareness can lead to better life chances for students with intellectual disabilities and their families. A review of the literature in chapter two clearly indicates that there is minimal research on the topic of equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. The literature reveals that even though current development of federal law requires school systems to provide opportunities for “all” students to learn, there currently is no standard curriculum in the U.S. that is uniformly offered to students with intellectual disabilities.

The findings from this investigation can be utilized as a catalyst in helping teachers rethink their positions in using the general education curriculum for instruction
of students with intellectual disabilities. Schools and districts commit a significant amount of time to allocating resources and disseminating training for teachers. Resources are needed to support teachers in standards-based instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. Professional development can be provided for teachers and paraprofessionals to assist them in creating, establishing, and implementing instructional resources that benefit all students. Further, these opportunities have the potential to generate teacher leaders who can enhance learning opportunities at every level of P-12 education. According to Copland and Knapp (2006), the cohesion of teachers and paraprofessionals provides knowledge and information needed to make decisions about educational programs for students, including those with intellectual disabilities. This unity between the teachers and paraprofessionals develops distributed leadership, which can provide the support needed to create an environment of social justice where students with intellectual disabilities are provided more than simply access to the general curriculum.

**Definition of Terms**

In order to provide understanding and clarity to terms and phrases embedded throughout this study, they are defined as follows:

*Alternate assessment* refers to the assessment process for students whose IEP teams have determined that it is not reasonable for them to participate in statewide assessments even with maximum accommodations. Students who are eligible to participate in the alternate assessment are those students who:

1. Participate in an alternate curriculum;
2. Are not able to participate in a group test even with maximum or nonstandard accommodations;
3. Do not need the test-taking skills of standard assessments for future use;

4. Are working toward a special education diploma.

*Asset-based* refers to that view of the student that recognizes the useful or valuable qualities of the student (Soukhanov, 2001).

*Deficit Thinking Model* is represented by the idea that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies (Valencia, 1997).

*Equity in education* refers to freedom from bias in the areas of resources (supports, finances, taxes), process (the school experience, program, content, access), and outcomes (the school experience, program, content, access) (Reimer, 2005). Equity recognizes that every learner receives what he or she needs educationally. All students have the same rights and opportunities to complete school activities and benefit from their educational system regardless of disability. In an equitable environment, schools should have sufficient resources to accommodate the learning needs of all students. In order for students to have full access to learning opportunities, each student needs to be supported in ways that maximize his or her learning potential.

*Functional curriculum* refers to a curriculum in which learning goals for students are based on living skills needed for success at home and in the community (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). The curriculum can include basic academic skills, such as telling time and money recognition, which are often off grade-level for the student. This curriculum is sometimes referred to as functional academics.

*Ideology* refers to a set of beliefs, values, and opinions that shape the way a person or group thinks, acts, and understands the environment (Soukhanov, 2001).
Intellectual disability refers to the category of disability characterized by lower than average intellectual ability and deficits in social and adaptive functioning, that is, limitations in such areas as communication, social, daily living or movement skills (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). There are different degrees of intellectual disabilities that affect the rate of learning and acquisition of adaptive skills. As with the label of this disability, the terms used to describe the various degrees of intellectual disabilities and the manner in which those degrees are defined have changed over time.

Marginalization refers to the exclusion of individuals, especially by relegating to the outer edge of a group (Soukhanov, 2001).

Perspectives refer to ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations as a way of conceptualizing based upon, and influenced by, personality or experiences.

Self-contained classroom refers to a small group classroom setting where curriculum and instruction are provided to students for the majority of the day or full day. The students in this type of classroom have opportunities for inclusion with their general education peers based on their IEPs (Friend & Bursuck, 2006).

Significant intellectual disability refers to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’ definition of disability as indicated by (DSM-IVTR ®) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) an IQ level of 35-40 to 50-55 (moderate to trainable), 20-25 to 35-40 (severe), or below 20 or 25 (profound). A more recent classification of the degree of intellectual disabilities focuses on the level of support that an individual requires rather than the person’s IQ level (Luckasson, Borthwick-Duffy, & Buntix, 2002). The range of support includes intermittent, limited, extensive, and pervasive (Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009). For the purpose of this study, students with
significant intellectual disabilities are defined as those who have a diagnosis and/or label of intellectual disabilities with evidence of cognitive functioning in the range of moderate to severe/profound or those who have the need for extensive or pervasive supports.

The terms *intellectual disability* and *significant intellectual disability* are used differentially in this manuscript based upon purpose and context.

*Social justice* refers to a perspective that honors and fully appreciates individual differences in linguistic background, class, culture, gender, ability, and race (Cochran-Smith, 2008).

*Standards-based (academic) curriculum* is a term that defines a cumulative body of knowledge and set of competencies that form the basis for quality education. (Ravitch, 1996).

**Overview of Chapters**

Chapter one provides a rationale for examining the perspectives of teachers and how their ideological beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and biases influence the degree to which they provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. It also provides the overarching research question and sub-questions on which future chapters of this study are founded.

Chapter two provides and presents an in-depth review of the literature discussing four overarching areas for discussion: equitable learning opportunities within education and social justice as it relates to teachers’ perspectives, a changing curriculum for students with disabilities, and the ways in which teachers’ perspectives influence their pedagogy. In this chapter, the conceptual framework, the methodological framework, and rationale for data analysis are also included.
Chapter three details the overall methods used in the current investigation. This chapter describes how the research was conducted and how data were analyzed and displayed. An in-depth description of each participant and educational setting, as well as the study’s assumptions, are offered in the chapter.

Chapter four presents results and interpretive findings based upon the data sources used for this study. Chapter five extends the interpretive findings by including the tension inherent in the self-contained classrooms. In this chapter, a description of typical curricula provided to students with intellectual disabilities is discussed. Participants share their perspectives regarding what they teach and how they teach.

Chapter six provides a summary, discussion of findings, implications for practice and policy, and recommendations for future research to include the importance to P-12 education. This chapter also integrates the findings into the conceptual framework of social justice.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of literature is a critical look at the existing research pertinent to this study. The purpose of this review is to convey what knowledge and ideas have been established related to key variables within the research question and sub-questions. It aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide students with intellectual disabilities rich, relevant, and challenging academic curricula that transcend traditionally delivered functional curricula. This review is framed around the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?
R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

**Organization of the Literature Review**

This literature review is organized into five parts. Part one begins with a brief historical overview of the education of students with intellectual disabilities and the legislative mandates that have had a profound effect on this population. The second section examines equity in education, social justice, and the marginalization of students with intellectual disabilities as portrayed within the deficit-thinking model. This section also explores teachers’ perspectives and their impact on equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. Section three explores the changes in curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. This section also examines social justice as an influence on teacher expectations related to classroom pedagogy. The fourth section examines empirical studies conducted to address access to general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities and the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement. The final section provides the conceptual framework, the methodological framework, and the rationale for data analysis.

**Historical Overview**

For decades students with intellectual disabilities have had to fight for educational opportunities comparable to those offered to their typically developing peers. Throughout the decades of the 1960s to the 1970s, children with disabilities were excluded from public schools. If they were not excluded, they found limited services and segregated settings (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). Over the past 30 years, laws in individual states have
The integration of students with disabilities evolved from the historic United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), concluding that a separate education did not represent an equal or equitable education for all students. Thus, the *Brown* decision brought awareness to the adverse impact of physical separation versus that of curricular separation.

The growing need to teach academics to students with intellectual disabilities stemmed primarily from the introduction of new legislation. The No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) required schools to evidence adequate yearly progress for all groups of students, including those with intellectual disabilities. The intended purpose of NCLB was to ensure that all children had a fair, equal, and compelling opportunity to obtain a high quality education and, at a minimum, reach proficiency on challenging state standards for academic achievement. IDEA (2004), the federal law governing programs for students with disabilities, required that all students have access to general education curricula. However, there is limited knowledge about the degree to which students with intellectual disabilities have had such access. Concerns about low teacher expectations were reflected in the IDEA amendments, which included statutory and regulatory language pertaining to providing such access. Section 300.347(a)(3) of IDEA requires that a student’s IEP include the following:

A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child (i) to advance appropriately toward attaining annual goals;
(ii) to be involved and progress in the general curriculum; and

(iii) to be educated and participate with disabled and nondisabled children.

Although the law requires that IEPs address issues pertaining to the degree to which students with intellectual disabilities participate and progress in the general curriculum, these mandates have more generally been referred to as the access to the general curriculum mandates. The purpose of these mandates is threefold: (a) to ensure that all students, including students with intellectual disabilities, have access to a challenging curriculum; (b) to ensure that all students, including students with intellectual disabilities, are held to high expectations; and (c) to ensure that students with intellectual disabilities are not excluded from accountability mechanisms emerging in school reform efforts across the nation (McLaughlin, 2010; Orkwis & McLane, 1998; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Huang Qi, & Park, 2006; Wehmeyer, Lattin & Agran, 2001; Wehmeyer et al. 2003; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleskie, 2002). These mandates were an attempt to make certain that students with intellectual disabilities received curriculum and instruction based on the general curriculum as defined by state and district standards. As Wehmeyer et al. (2003) argue, “Consistent with these intents, which fundamentally align special education services with standards-based (academic) reform efforts, the general curriculum was defined in the regulations as referring to the same curriculum as other, nondisabled children receive” (p. 263). Without a uniform curriculum, students with intellectual disabilities run the risk of being instructionally short changed.

**Equity and Education**

The literature is replete with evidence to support the need for equity in education for students with intellectual disabilities (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Adams et al.,
2000; Cochran-Smith, 2008). There are also numerous studies that support both the use of a functional curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities and the importance of providing opportunities for exposure to the general education curriculum (Browder et al., 2007; McGrew & Evans, 2004; Westwood, 2003). While educational research supports the idea of students with intellectual disabilities having access to general education instruction, minimal studies exist depicting how teachers’ perspectives influence the degree to which they provide equitable learning opportunities. There are studies that identify teacher beliefs and expectations as perspectives that affect the curriculum provided to students with intellectual disabilities (Brophy, 1988; Cook, 2001; Cotton, 2001; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003; Lucas, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The present study will extend the literature to explore a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide equitable learning opportunities to this population.

What constitutes an equitable education has been subject to much debate and discussion among educational policymakers, practitioners, and researchers over the years. Educational equity can be framed in terms of both equal access to opportunities and outcomes that help individuals recognize their potential (McLaughlin, 2010; Neito, 1996; Tomlinson, 2003). Some researchers relate equity of education with availability of equal resources (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2010; Copeland, Huaqing Qi, Park, & Valenzuela, 2006; Dyson, 2001). A recurring theme in the literature is the distinction between the ideals of educational equity and educational equality (Green, 1983; O’Neill, 1976). According to Green (1983), “Inequity always implies injustice…. Persons may be treated unequally but justly” (p. 324). Education in an inequitable environment is almost certain to have an adverse impact on students with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the
rationale that attempts to justify it. One factor that contributes to an inequitable education and appears significant in the literature is deficit thinking. Deficit thinking represents an idea that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies (Harry & Klinger, 2007; Valencia, 1997). The assumption is that access to a high quality education is possible and available; however, the students’ disabilities are likely to prevent the student from capitalizing on such an opportunity. The disadvantage to deficit thinking is that it subscribes, in large part, to a mentality that *blames the victim* and fails to recognize other possible causes for school failure, such as inadequate instruction. The deficit thinking model heightens the importance of investigating how teachers’ perspectives influence the degree to which they provide students with intellectual disabilities equitable learning opportunities.

Hahn (1995) purports that from the perspective of many disabled individuals, their principal difficulties do not result from physical or mental limitations. On the contrary, their major problems reflect the inequities that emerge from efforts to cope in an environment generally designed by and for the nondisabled. Equitable learning opportunities, from the perspective of social justice, are described as opportunities and outcomes for all students who are challenging classroom practices, policies, labels, and assumptions that reinforce inequities (Cochran-Smith, 2008 p.13). Teaching practices must be conceptualized in a way that embodies social justice if students with intellectual disabilities are to begin accessing equity in learning opportunities (Apple & Beane, 2007; Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenburg, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 2008; Freire, 1998).

Cochran-Smith (2008) asserts that teachers need two things to practice successfully: subject matter knowledge and teaching skill based on scientific research.
The author notes, “From this perspective, practice is what teachers do in classrooms, which can be prescribed and assessed independent of local communities and cultures” (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p.14). From the perspective of social justice, teaching practice also involves how teachers think about their work, including their ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations, and interpret what is transpiring in schools and classrooms (Friere, 1998; Horton & Freire, 1990). As Cochran-Smith (2004) argues:

   Curriculum and instruction are neither neutral nor obvious. Rather, the academic organization of information and inquiry reflects contested views about what and whose knowledge is of most value. In addition, influential parts of curriculum and instruction include what is present or absent, whose perspectives are central or marginalized, and whose interests are served or undermined. (p. 18)

**Teachers’ perspectives.** Case law, subsequent amendments to IDEA, federal regulations, and guidance continue to create expectations about the extent to which students with intellectual disabilities are expected to benefit academically from their education. Unfortunately, there is still limited consensus among educators regarding appropriate achievement expectations for students with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities (McGrew & Evans, 2004). The ideological principles of teachers guide their expectations, therefore leading teachers to create generalizations about the ability of students with intellectual disabilities. Valencia (1997) states that these generalizations not only affect students’ abilities to succeed in school, they impede the process of developing policy and curricula and allow the process of implementing educational policy to go unchecked.
Providing equity in learning opportunities for students with intellectual
disabilities requires careful examination of the teachers’ educational ideologies. Looking
at teachers’ educational ideologies through a social justice lens, King (2006) asserts that
if justice is our objective in education, then we must recognize and account for the ways
ideologically distorted knowledge sustains societal injustice. Teachers’ perspectives
about aspects of teaching, such as the purpose of schooling, perceptions of students, what
knowledge is of most worth, and the value of certain teaching techniques and pedagogical
principles, are described by Carrington (1999) as one’s educational platform. These
characteristics are also prominent in the description of teachers’ educational ideologies.
The educational ideologies support teachers’ actions and may be used to justify or
validate their actions. Kagan (1992) contends that educational ideology has also been
described as a teacher’s professional knowledge that consists of a highly personalized
pedagogy, a belief system that controls the teacher’s perception, judgment, and behavior.
According to Kagan, this knowledge of profession is situated in three important ways: (a)
in context-meaning (it is related to specific groups of students); (b) in content (it is
related to particular academic material to be taught); and (c) in person (it is embedded
within the teachers’ unique belief system).

The beliefs and attitudes of the people in a community or organization are also
reflected in the economic and political arrangements and organizations, and these are
contexts for differential treatments of members (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1998;
Shakespeare, 1994). Hargreaves (1994) reminds us that a teaching culture includes
beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of doing things among the school community.
Teachers continue to solve problems in their classrooms largely by relying on their own
beliefs and experiences (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Hoy, 1969; Smylie, 1989). When teachers do accept information from outside sources, they filter it through their own personal belief systems, translating it and absorbing it into their pedagogies (Berliner, 1987; Carter & Doyle, 1989). Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes concerning students with disabilities, which are integrated as part of their educational ideologies, have a very powerful influence on their expectations for the progress of these students in the school environment (Lee et al., 2006; McGrew & Evans, 2004; Minke, Bear, Deemer, & Griffin, 1996; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996)

A Changing Curriculum for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Nolet and McLaughlin (2005) describe the foundations of special education, positing:

The foundation of special education rests with the guarantee that each eligible student receives a “free and appropriate public education” or FAPE. What is appropriate for an individual student is to be determined by parents and a multidisciplinary team of professionals. These decisions are evident in the student Individualized Education Program (IEP), which specifies the annual educational goals and the special education and related services the student requires to meet those goals. (p. 13)

McLaughlin (2010) reminds us that the procedural requirements associated with the IEP ensure that each child is treated justly. There are also substantive requirements associated with the IEP that there be educational benefit to the child (Pullen, 2008; Yell, 2006). The traditional view of IEP development placed students with intellectual disabilities in isolation from broader general education curricular goals. The IEP process
involved testing students; identifying their learning strengths and needs; and developing annual goals, objectives, and related supports were to meet their needs, resulting in the establishment of a primarily functional curriculum. Shriner and DeStefano (2003) assert that IEPs are often a collection of discrete skill objectives that lead to isolated instructional decisions.

According to Nolet and McLaughlin (2005), within a standards-driven reform model, special education is evolving into an array of services and supports that provide students access to the general education curriculum, where IEP becomes a tool that specifies how to implement general education instruction with individual students (p. 13). McLaughlin (2010) reports that as a result of the general move toward standards-based (academic) education for students with intellectual disabilities, a new practice is emerging with respect to IEP development. The new practice directly links IEP goals to a state’s grade level content standards (p. 270). Wehmeyer et al. (2003) reiterate that federal law requires that IEPs of students with intellectual disabilities describe the ways students will be involved with, and progress in, the general curriculum.

As a result of the mandates espoused by IDEA (1997) and NCLB (2002), educators need to reconsider the process by which the educational programs of students with intellectual disabilities are designed and implemented in such a way as to ensure that access to the general education curriculum is realized (Wehmeyer et al., 2001). The intent of providing ‘access’ is identified in the IDEA (1997) regulations:

….[the access provisions] that require a description of how a child’s involvement in the general curriculum is a statutory requirement and cannot be deleted. The requirement is important because it provides the
basis for determining what accommodations the child needs in order to participate in the general curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate.

(p. 12592)

Wehmeyer et al. (2001) maintain that the modifying clause to associate with access, therefore, is “to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the child” (p. 330). What is determined as appropriate is, basically, an IEP team decision, and the challenge ahead is to reform the IEP process to ensure that decisions about a given student’s education are driven by (a) high expectations as embodied in the general curriculum and (b) the unique needs of the student.

**Social justice and teachers’ expectations.** To genuinely include students with intellectual disabilities in the schools, there may need to be a change in the teacher’s mindset. Teachers will need to demonstrate their confidence in the student’s potential for growth. Administration and teachers must embrace the two fundamental assumptions or beliefs that guide the creation of 21st century educational classrooms: (a) a quality education is the fundamental right of every child; and (b) teachers and school personnel are essential in creating an optimal learning environment that ensures that each student learns (Ferretti & Eisenman, 2010; McGrew & Evans, 2004).

Reflecting on teacher expectations from a social justice perspective, theorists Apple and Beane (2007) propose the importance of the role of democracy in schools. They assert that those involved in democratic schools see themselves as participants in communities of learning and these communities are diverse. Within the schools, diversity is prized, not viewed as a problem. Such communities include people who reflect differences in culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and abilities (Apple & Beane, 2007;
Cochran-Smith, 2004; Friere, 1998; Yuen & Westwood, 2001). Apple and Beane (2007) contend:

Separating people of any age on the basis of these differences or using labels to stereotype them simply creates divisions and status systems that detract from the democratic nature of the community and the dignity of the individuals against whom such practices work so harshly. (p. 6)

Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them (Apple & Beane, 2007; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Freire, 1970; Marri, 2005).

A critical segment of the literature reflects teachers’ expectations of students with intellectual disabilities. Some researchers have examined the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy (more currently known as expectancy effects) and its implications on the education of students with intellectual disabilities (Goodlad, 2004: Jussim & Harber, 2005; McGrew & Evans, 2004: Merton, 1948). Spitz (1999) posits that the concept is simple: If we prophesize (expect) that something will happen, we behave in a manner that will make it happen (p. 200). In most expectancy effects research, it is the person in a position of authority, such as a teacher, who holds expectations of an individual under his/her supervision. It seems that expectations expressed by an authority figure through verbal and non-verbal communication often influence the self-image and behavior of the individual in such a way that the expectations come to pass.

Friere (1998) speaks passionately about generating freedom for students to think and make choices. The low expectations that teachers hold for students with intellectual disabilities can crush that freedom, enhancing the authority of the teacher, and presenting
the teacher as the one who knows and does everything. Friere (1970) believes that what the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. According to the noted scholar, this is accomplished, not by “an act of depositing” knowledge (p. 72), but through experiencing opportunities for extension of knowledge using creative thinking and experiences.

It is well established in the literature that teachers’ perspectives influence their expectations for students with intellectual disabilities; therefore, we can hypothesize that teachers’ expectations directly influence teaching practice and student learning (Nader, 1984). Naturally, there is great variation and individual difference in teachers’ ideological beliefs and expectations towards students with intellectual disabilities (Cook, 2001). It is important that teachers have positive expectations about student learning potential in order to move toward providing more equitable, i.e., academically-focused, learning opportunities for all students.

**Empirical Studies**

McGrew and Evans’ (2004) synthesis on expectations for student with cognitive disabilities offers a discussion on the dangers of making blanket assumptions about achievement expectations for individuals based on their cognitive abilities. Due to the only true law in psychology (the law of individual differences), optimal learning conditions and techniques are not universal across learners (p.4). In addition, they reveal a review of research on the effects of teacher expectations on the achievement patterns of students with cognitive disabilities. McGrew and Evans report that a study of nearly 100 teachers and 1500 students conducted by Madon, Jussim, and Eccles (1997) revealed low achievers were differentially responsive to teachers’ over- or under-estimated
achievement growth. Specifically, when teachers under-estimated their achievement, low achievers achieved lower; when teachers over-estimated their predicted growth, low achievers achieved higher. As the researchers report, “Unfortunately, there is still limited consensus among educators regarding appropriate achievement expectations for students with disabilities, particularly those with cognitive [intellectual] disabilities” (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997, as quoted in McGrew & Evans, 2004, p.12).

Two quantitative studies that looked at access to general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities (Agran et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2003) similarly found that students with intellectual disabilities are not held to the same performance standards as typical peers. The quantitative study conducted by Agran et al. (2002) surveyed 1,485 teachers in the state of Iowa. The respondents were certified to teach students with moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disabilities at grade levels kindergarten through 12. The purpose of the study was to survey opinions of teachers who served this population on issues relating to access to the general curriculum. The study revealed that the majority of teachers believed that access to the standards was not appropriate for students with severe disabilities, and teachers were not actively involved in planning relating to access of the curriculum standards. Comparable findings were reported in the study conducted by Wehmeyer et al. (2003) which includes 33 middle school students, all identified as having intellectual disabilities. The findings suggest that the general education classroom was the place where students engaged in tasks linked to standards, and, conversely, the resource setting or self-contained classroom was where students worked on IEP goal-related tasks.
Studies repeatedly show that a lack of high expectations tends to go hand-in-hand with low achieving classrooms (Cotton, 2001). In these classrooms, teachers generally view their students as limited in their ability to learn, and this view tends to create an atmosphere of poor academic achievement. This holds true for students with and without disabilities, including intellectual disabilities.

**Conceptual Framework: A Social Justice Perspective**

The conceptual framework that undergirds this study finds its roots in social justice theory. Social justice has been characterized in the literature in a number of ways. For the purpose of this work, the theories of Apple (1990), Freire (1970, 1998), and Cochran-Smith (2008) are used to provide a cornerstone to teachers for establishing social justice in education as it applies to students with intellectual disabilities.

Apple’s (1990) theoretical standpoint is clear: he analyzes equal access to content knowledge and curriculum in the context of democratic schools and how the structures and processes within democratic schools create avenues toward bringing democracy to the planned curriculum. He contends that educational issues, such as visions of *legitimate* knowledge, what counts as *good* teaching and learning, and what is a *just* society, remain at the core of ongoing struggles that constantly shape curricular terrain. According to Apple, a democratic curriculum emphasizes access to a wide range of information (p. 4). Educators in a democratic society have an obligation to help students seek out a wide range of ideas and to voice their own. Many schools shirk this obligation by narrowing the range of school-sponsored knowledge to what we might call *official* or high-status knowledge that is produced or endorsed by the dominant culture (Apple, 1990). Apple theorizes that democratic educators live with the constant tension of seeking a more
significant education for students while still attending to the official knowledge and skills expected by powerful educational forces. Equal access to content knowledge and curriculum involves discontinuing the rigid skill and drill programs that often constitute the school experiences of students with intellectual disabilities. It is the task of the educator to reconstruct dominant knowledge and employ it to help those who are least privileged in this society (p. 16).

The theories of Freire (1970) are thoughtful explorations of democracy in the education of marginalized students. According to Freire, an understanding of educators as potential agents of social change means acting on the idea that teachers can influence students’ learning and life chances (p. 32). Freire criticized prevailing forms of education, contending that in traditional education it is the job of the teacher to deposit in the minds of students the bits of information that constitute knowledge. His philosophy illuminates the theory that educators cannot just transmit information; they have to awaken a curiosity. He believed that knowledge is never static, but always in the process. Access to content knowledge while creating the pedagogical conditions for dialogue allows students to explore their reality and overcome those aspects of their social constructs that are paralyzing.

The work of Cochran-Smith (2008) is grounded in the theories postulated by Apple (1990) and Freire (1970). Consistent with Apple’s and Freire’s tenets, Cochran-Smith (2008) asserts that teaching for social justice is fundamental to the learning and life chances of all teachers and pupils who are current and future participants in a diverse democratic society (p. 3). Cochran-Smith also contends that knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences act as a filter through which teachers make decisions and support
learning. This can extend to opportunities available to students with intellectual disabilities for access to content knowledge and curricula. Cochran-Smith reflects on the assertion made by Oakes and Lipton (1999), contending that teachers’ influence on student learning depends on the belief that all students can learn academically challenging material. This suggests an *asset-based* view of the student rather than a deficit based perspective. In the context of equal access to content knowledge and curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities, the theories of Cochran-Smith recognize the influence that teachers’ perspectives have on their practice. Referring to the work of Ginsberg and Lindsey (1995), Cochran-Smith proposes that when practice is consistent with the aims of social justice, it is framed by the understanding that teaching practice, whether by default or design, always takes a stand on society’s current distribution of resources and current respect or disrespect for social groups (p. 14).

**Methodological framework.** According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative case study provides an in-depth investigation of a “bounded system,” based on a diverse array of data collection materials, and the researcher situates this case within its larger context (p. 244). A case study approach was selected for this investigation because of its utility in answering the overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?
R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

Yin (1994) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident, and in which the multiple source of evidence are used. Yin (2009) states that case studies are used to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, social, political, and related phenomena. According to Bell (1987), the philosophy behind the case study is that sometimes just by looking carefully at a practical, real-life instance, a full picture can be obtained of the actual interaction of variables or events. Thus, the aim of the case study is to provide a three-dimensional picture of any given situation. It should illustrate relationships, corporate-political issues and patterns of influence within a particular context.

Yin (1994) contends that case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as a result relies on multiple data sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion. Several of the data sources used in this study include in-depth biographical and open-ended interviews (written transcriptions), field notes from
classroom observations, a curricular ideological survey, and classroom documents in the form of teachers’ collages.

**Rationale for data analysis.** A critical ethnography lens was employed for this study to view teachers’ ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations. Critical ethnography is not a theory but a perspective through which a qualitative researcher can frame questions and promote action. According to Thomas (2003), its purpose is emancipation of cultural members from ideologies that are not to their benefit and not of their creation – an important concept in critical theory (p.4). Because critical ethnography is borne out of the theoretical underpinnings of critical theory, it is premised upon the assumption that cultural institutions can produce a false consciousness in which power and oppression become taken-for-granted realities or ideologies. In this way, critical ethnography goes beyond a description of the culture to action for change, by challenging the false consciousness and ideologies exposed through the research. Critical ethnography can go beyond the classroom to ask questions about the historical forces shaping societal patterns as well as the fundamental issues and dilemmas of policy, power, and dominance in institutions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In a case study being guided by a critical approach, criteria for evaluating the research findings, process, and report include ensuring that power and the location of power are the key issue. An additional criterion, identified by Grbich (2007), for this approach is ensuring the emancipation and social transformation of inequality and oppression suffered by participants is addressed by some form of action. A final criterion within this study is addressing who the author is and how he/she is influencing the data collection, design, and analysis of the study.
Summary

This review was framed around the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

This literature review was organized into five parts. Part one began with a brief historical overview of the education of students with intellectual disabilities and the legislative mandates that have had a profound effect on this population. The second section examined equity in education, social justice, and the marginalization of students with intellectual disabilities as portrayed within the deficit-thinking model. This section also explored teachers’ perspectives and their impact on equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. Section three examined the changes in
curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. This section also examined social justice as an influence on teacher expectations related to classroom pedagogy. The fourth section included empirical studies conducted to address access to general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities and the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement. The final section provided the conceptual framework, the methodological framework, and the rationale for data analysis.

Embedded throughout this literature review were the elements of equity in education, social justice, and the marginalization of students with intellectual disabilities as portrayed within the deficit-thinking model. The literature appears to treat changes in curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities, teachers’ perspectives, and social justice within teacher expectations as pivotal motivators for providing an academic curriculum to students with intellectual disabilities. This study addresses a gap in the literature, looking at teachers and the way they look at students.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The qualitative design for this research utilized multiple-case study methods as the primary approach. Multiple case studies involve investigating and comparing cases in their totality (holistic). According to Yin (2009), each individual case study consists of a whole study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for the case. Each case’s conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases. The replication throughout the cases corroborates, qualifies, and/or extends the findings of the study. The multiple-case study approach was used to explore the following research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?
R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Context and Access**

This study was conducted over a two-year period. For selection of participants in this qualitative study, I consulted with a special education supervisor, acquiring the names of possible informants who are teachers of students with intellectual disabilities at the elementary level. This study focused on the elementary level, as it is a critical time in education during which students acquire the basic skills for learning. The participants are from various elementary schools within the county and represent students of varied grade levels. The teachers of students with intellectual disabilities are teaching in self-contained classrooms where the students are in one classroom for more than 60% of the school day. The students do have opportunities for inclusion through classes such as art and music, lunch, and school-wide activities.

Access was acquired to the elementary schools through conversations held with each school principal and the teachers who agreed to participate. A description of the study provided information on the amount of time spent in the teachers’ classroom. The types of data collected for the study and confidentiality procedures were outlined to the participants. A copy of the approved IRB for the school district was provided to the principal. Written permission to conduct the investigation was granted by the principal of each school. Throughout the study, the researcher made sure to adhere to any requests specified by the principal and answered any questions related to the study.
Participants and Setting

Participants in this study included three elementary level special education teachers within a public P-12 school system in the southeastern U.S. All three participants teach at different schools within the same district. The participants are all female with an average of 18 years teaching experience in a variety of educational settings. Participants have been at their respective schools for approximately eight years. Two of the participants teach students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities and the other participant teaches students with moderate intellectual disabilities. All participants were required to read and sign a participant consent form prior to being interviewed or observed (see Appendix A).

Bias. The relationship that I had with the participants was neutral. Although my relationship with the participants was neutral, I could be considered one of the research tools, which made me biased to a certain extent. Throughout the study I acknowledged any biases I may have had resulting from my personal history, approaches, and cultural identity that may influence my interpretations. Because the participants spoke openly about their personal teaching philosophies and instructional practices, it was important to protect them from any possible professional repercussions. To ensure that stringent anonymity was practiced, materials were secured in a locked file cabinet in my home at all times, and pseudonyms for participants and schools were utilized throughout the study.

Participant selection. The participants were selected as a purposeful sample. Selection criteria included (a) that participants be employed special education teachers; (b) that participants work with students with intellectual disabilities; (c) that participants
agree to terms of the study; (d) that participants work in the same school system; and (e) that participants have been working with students with disabilities for at least three (3) years. Yin (2009) states that the simplest multiple-cases design would be the selection of two or more cases that are believed to be literal replications. This influenced the decision to include three participants in the current study. An additional consideration as to the selection of three participants included the depth of the study, which incorporated five data sources.

**Participant descriptions: Moving in the opposite direction.** The participants described below all chose an opposite career path from the one that they had imagined due to circumstances in their lives. They came from varied backgrounds and experience, with two of them transitioning away from general education and one participant relinquishing a career in music. The direction that each participant embraced led to teaching students with intellectual disabilities. The participants have a great passion for teaching, and although they may differ in their ideology and pedagogy, they share a common goal to ensure that their students achieve to the best of their ability in an equitable environment.

**Riley – Never say never.** Riley, who is in her early thirties, was born in middle Georgia and moved to the county in which she currently teaches when she was six years old. She completed up through the twelfth grade in this same county. Riley expressed during the interview, “I always swore I was not going to be a teacher and my mom (a general education teacher) would always say *never say never*, which of course would drive me insane.” Riley continued to remember her conversations with her mother about teaching:
I would play teacher as a little girl, you know, I had dolls, and I would line them up, and my mom would say, “Oh, you’re going to be a great teacher when you grow up,” and I always said, “Nope, nope, I’m never going to be a teacher.” For whatever reason, I didn’t want to be a teacher, and I was really good at creative writing, so I thought I wanted to be a writer or a journalist; in middle school and the beginning of high school, that’s what I wanted to do.

In the biographical interview, Riley revealed that she did remember her first thoughts of special education or students with disabilities. She stated that there was a class of students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities at her elementary school. Riley thought it “odd that the other kids didn’t want to be with them.” She indicated that she never saw them with the general population and they were always “doing their own thing.” Riley stated, “I was probably one of those kids that stared but I was interested. I always thought it was odd that I never got to interact with them.” Riley’s statements suggest that she was concerned about the isolation of the students with disabilities.

During the biographical interview, Riley made several references to the fact that she did not want to teach in a self-contained classroom. After realizing that she would be pursuing a teaching career, she “always wanted to be the one who would just kind of pop in and out...have a group of kids that I see like a therapist.” It could be assumed that Riley made the connection that if the students are isolated then the teacher of the class would be isolated within the school environment also.

Riley expressed that even though she did not want to be a teacher and have her own classroom, she did know that she wanted to work with children with autism in some
way. She had become very interested in this area of special education during high school and felt she could work with this population through music therapy, speech, or occupational therapy. Reflecting on Riley’s responses, it seemed that when she was younger she related teaching only to the general education population because that is the career her mother chose. It was quite evident that, during elementary and middle school years, she held a curiosity about students with disabilities. Then as she attended high school, she became more familiar with students with autism, and the desire to work with these students increased. She stated:

I was always into music and when I was in high school I started learning about autism. I got very interested in autism and started researching what I could do with my life. I had played the piano since like third grade, so I got interested in music therapy.

Riley completed an associate degree in music and went back to college for a degree in special education. Her first job was teaching pre-kindergarten students with intellectual disabilities, the majority being students with autism, in a center setting. Friend and Bursuck (2006) asserts that students with intellectual disabilities have significant limitations in cognitive ability and adaptive behavior (the age-appropriate behaviors necessary for people to live independently and to function safely and appropriately in daily life), with the disability occurring in a range of severity. Students with intellectual disabilities learn at a far slower pace than do other students, and they may reach a point where their learning levels off. Despite the degree of intellectual disability, most individuals with this disability can lead independent or semi-independent lives as adults and can hold appropriate jobs (p.22).
Riley ended up teaching in a self-contained classroom, the opposite situation that she had envisioned for herself while developing her career path. The center was intended to teach students with disabilities and serve as a bridge to public school. Riley explained that the purpose of the center was to prepare the students that were functioning at a higher academic level for inclusion opportunities once they entered elementary school. She stated that “they worked so hard and almost everyone got to do some inclusion when they got to elementary school.” This statement suggests that Riley had prepared her students with the skills needed to successfully participate in opportunities for instruction in the general education classroom. She continued, “Had they gone from special education pre-kindergarten directly, they would not have made it.” Riley claimed that the extra year gave the students more time to mature and learn which made all the difference in the world. During this part of the conversation in the interview, one could hear the excitement in Riley’s voice and see the look of accomplishment on her face. Clearly she was proud of her teaching and the learning outcomes she had been a part of for the students. It seemed ironic that Riley’s early memories of special education reflected isolation of the students with disabilities, and her first job allowed opportunities for teaching that prepared the students for inclusion.

While teaching at the center, Riley shared that she had the opportunity to implement specialized training to assist students with autism. She claimed that it prepared her to be very structured and stated, “It has helped me through everything I do.” Riley inferred that she continues to use what she learned from the training in her current classroom, which is teaching students with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities. She
seemed to indicate that the specialized training was advantageous for her classroom teaching and precipitated positive learning outcomes for her students.

*Sandra – A fork in the road.* Sandra is in her fifties and has been teaching students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities for about 18 years. Students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities have IQ’s that range from below 20 to 35, significant deficits in adaptive behavior, and require extensive support with daily living activities throughout their lives. She was born in the southern region of the United States and attended college in the same area. She returned home and completed her degree in Early Childhood Education at a university system in the southeast United States. Sandra was married and had a child shortly after college, so she did not work immediately after graduating. The unfortunate circumstance of divorce led Sandra to seek employment, which she found as a kindergarten teacher. She taught for two years.

A second marriage and a move to another region of Georgia brought Sandra to a fork in the road. Sandra began substitute teaching in a special education classroom for students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities. She stated that “the teacher was always absent, and I was in there a lot and I just started…. I don’t know, really liking being in there.” The classroom teacher ultimately moved out of state, and the principal asked Sandra if she would like to be a long term substitute in that classroom. She agreed to accept the position, and this decision led her to completing a master’s degree in special education and becoming a certified teacher for this classroom of students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities.

The decision to teach in the field of special education seemed to take Sandra by surprise. Sandra maintained that she had very minimal contact with individuals with
disabilities growing up. She remembered accounts of going to nursing homes as a girl scout and seeing individuals with disabilities at her church. She states, “Well, I guess there were a couple girls in school that had cerebral palsy, but I didn’t know what was wrong with them.” Sandra revealed during the interview,

The people in my home town were like, I can’t believe you’re doing it, because I was always a *prima donna*. I was spoiled rotten, and I had everything I ever wanted. And all of the sudden, I’m changing diapers, and they can’t believe it. So now I dress like a bum, don’t wear make-up…because I get bleach on everything, and we’re on the floor all of the time, and I’m documentation queen. I document everything.

In this excerpt, it is clear that Sandra came from a privileged background, and even her friends from her home town were surprised at the change they saw in her. It is evident in this conversation that Sandra is jumping in the trenches to work with her students. She seemed proud of her ability to take care of the students and that she keeps detailed documentation. During the interview, she made reference to the fact that the principal came to her classroom often and commented on how well she worked with the students. She stated, “I think I’m pretty good at it, but there’s always room to grow.”

When asked about continuing her education she stated, “It’s not worth it, I’m comfortable.” Continuing the conversation Sandra expressed, “I don’t like the children with behavior [issues]. I don’t particularly care for them…. Sometimes I get someone that has behavior issues, and I become the bad cop.”

It can be assumed that Sandra clearly enjoys the *caring* of the children in her classroom. She made reference to the fact that her students have physical disabilities and
require positioning throughout the day. Students with physical disabilities require well supported seating and positioning in order to obtain optimal functioning. Improper seating and positioning may actually cause functional limitations. The optimal seated posture is one where the trunk is supported in an upright, centered position with head in midline, with as much freedom of movement as possible to encourage interaction with and visual regard for the environment (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 1996). She contended that she loved that part of working with the students indicating, “I don’t really like the kids that want to tear up your room because they are miserable inside…. It seems that Sandra is more confident in building functional skills when working with her students than addressing existing behavior issues. It is clear that she tries to avoid these issues in her classroom. It could be inferred that she is looking for the acceptance and/or praise from students, parents, and/or administration; therefore, she focuses on the areas of curriculum with which she is most comfortable when working with the students.

Sandra exhibited concern for the students in her classroom that appear to be higher functioning. She asserts:

… well back when I was at another school I had this little boy in a wheel chair and we’d watch PBS while Mary and I… well I had six kids back then and like four or five in chairs and one that walked around. And so after they ate, we’d sit them right here and let them watch TV while we ate right here at the table. And I noticed that this child was laughing appropriately at the shows but the rest of them are like this… and so then I made some pictures of the alphabet, and I quickly realized, that child… he
could identify “dog” the word, the word “cat” you know I had the kindergarten Dolch words… I had a really hard time that first year; I had a terrible speech teacher. She was some contract lady. She wouldn’t help me with him, you know… try to tell somebody. The second year, we got a good speech teacher, I think she’s still in the county, somebody I can’t think of her last name… and she was a county employee and she picked up on it right away when I showed her. You know … but anyway I finally got him out.

Sandra seemed adamant about having the students appropriately placed in settings that addressed their strengths and needs. Several timed during the interview, she spoke of occasions where students were placed in her classroom because of a severe physical disability or because they were thought to have cognitive ability in the severe/profound range of intellectual functioning. In the examples she gave, Sandra recognized abilities in the students that signaled to her that the placements for the students were not appropriate. She made it clear that most of her students functioned in the profound range of cognitive ability and that the students who were showing more strength in the academic areas needed to be in classes with students who exhibited higher ranges of academic functioning.

**Maria – A second chance.** Maria is thirty years old and has been teaching students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities for fewer than five years. She was born in the northeastern United States and moved to the south when she was 14 years old. Maria explained that while her family was visiting an Atlanta area mall, someone held the door open for them and then a girl inside the mall spoke and asked how they were
doing. According to Maria, this “southern hospitality” does not exist in New England.
The interaction at the mall made such an impression on Maria and her family that they went back to their home state, put the house on the market, and moved to the south.

Maria earned her high school diploma and attended a university in southern United States where she received an undergraduate degree in Child and Family Development. She expressed that she always knew that she wanted to work with children, but from a more developmental perspective “…like this is normal, this is not normal.” This was the plan until her life took a turn in the opposite direction. In the middle of Maria’s senior year of college, she was diagnosed with Lymphoma (blood cancer) and was in serious condition. She survived surgery, chemotherapy, and the loss of all of her hair. During that time she continued as a full time student and graduated on time. Maria indicated that she would like to think that she is determined. It seems that Maria used this quality to accomplish life-long goals. Her doctors told her that she could not work with children because her immune system was so weak and recommended taking a year away from education. Maria worked out of the field of education for that year and saved enough money to go back to the University of Georgia to complete a master’s degree in Early Childhood. She was given a second chance to work with children and landed her first job teaching fifth grade. During the interview Maria described, quite proudly, her experience with one of the students.

To sit with Lisa, you can’t make her do it… she has to choose to do it. She has to want to do it. So when I figured her out and I got her to choose to do it, it just… all of the sudden my whole world opened up and my eyes opened up and it was like, “Okay, this is how you do it.” So I figured out
how to work with her. And then that’s when it boomed because after
that… she’ll do anything for me. That girl will do anything for me because
of the way that I work with her. And other people would come in and try
to work with her and she would not do it.

Her determination drove her to work with the students by incorporating
community service and supervising a variety of clubs in the school in addition to the
daily classroom teaching. Maria stated, “I was very active in the school. I was there until
the janitor kicked me out every night.”

Maria fell in love and followed her heart, which led her to seek employment in
another region of the state. This was during a time when the economy had taken a turn for
the worse and many teachers were losing their jobs. She exhibited persistence in seeking
employment in the school system by going to all of the elementary schools in the county
and introducing herself to the principals in hopes that they had a position available. One
principal proceeded to interview Maria and told her she would be the first person she
would call if she needed a teacher. The phone call came the next morning:

“Look Maria, all I have is this special-ed group called severe/profound.
And I’m not going to lie to you, this is what it entails.” So she started
telling me some of the things that you may or may not know and some of
the things that are not desirable with this position. And she said, “You
need to make a decision; I don’t want you to answer me right now, I want
you to think about this and tell me by Friday”, so in two days. The
principal continued, “So if you tell me by Friday, I guarantee you that this
will be one year and at the end of the year next semester, we will get you
in the general grades. I cannot guarantee the grade, but we’ll see what we can do, I promise.” So she said, “Think about it.”

Maria proceeded to call her fiancé and members of her family. She revealed, “I decided to take it because I loved my fiancé more than the thought of possibly hating my job.” Maria admitted that she was nervous because it was so different from teaching general education and she had to take an exam known as the GASE in order to be certified to teach in the area of special education. She admitted to having minimal exposure to students with disabilities throughout her schooling. She felt some comfort, however, in the fact that the principal had promised that the position was just for one year and then she could teach in a general education classroom. Maria claimed that going back to teaching in a general education classroom was always in the back of her mind for that first year. Reflecting on some of the differences between teaching in general education and special education Maria asserts:

There are some things that I do miss about general education; a lot of the interaction is so different… the progress is so different. It’s not slow and small, the progress in general education of course is so different. And I use a lot of humor when I teach, and my kids don’t understand it. And I like to talk about community service, and I like to talk about a lot of those things, and my students don’t really understand them, and I can’t really do a lot of those things. A lot of those things are different, but I still am happy doing what I’m doing, and to stay the least, this is a blessing in disguise and so… I mean truly.
In this excerpt, Maria revealed some of the aspects of teaching the general education population that she missed. She referred to the two areas of teaching as being different but did not identify one as being better than the other. She alluded to the fact that teaching students with intellectual disabilities is really a blessing. Although Maria and her fiancé are no longer together, she attributes being blessed with her current job because of the relationship that she did have with him. She indicated that she would have never made a career change for any other reason. Maria seemed at peace with her decision to remain in her current position and even told the principal that she wanted to remain the teacher in that classroom instead of going back into teaching general education.

Maria exhibited a sense of accomplishment as she recounted how she worked with one of her students. She described the student as having significant difficulty focusing and demonstrating extreme behaviors such as falling to the floor, screaming, and hitting at other students. She stated, “I figured out the way things needed to be approached. I made some very significant progress with him, and he did things for me that he had never done for anybody else.” Maria’s statements seemed to indicate that when presented with a challenging student, she explores all options in an attempt to create successful learning opportunities for that student.

Maria gave an example of creating opportunities for the student:

He can’t go to specials [general education P.E. class] due to significant behavior issues because every time he leaves the room he throws a fit. But he does have adapted P.E., and what they’ll do in adapted P.E. is they’ll go into the gym, and they’ll do one circle around the gym because at the
time that they go there’s no one in there yet. It’s right before the first class comes in. So I’m trying to get him used to going to the gym because eventually I would like him to be able to go with the general education class.

Schools and neighborhoods. Harrison Elementary School, the school of one of the participants in this study, struggled for many years with overcrowding. The current facility was built in 1999 for grades K through five and is at approximately at 86% capacity with ten mobile units. The majority of students at Harrison come from lower-middle to middle income blue-collar families, with a sizable percentage that could be classified as low income. The percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunches has recently fluctuated due to redistricting. For many years Harrison Elementary School was, to a degree, the defining aspect of the community. Generation after generation within the same families attended and supported the school. There is still a strong sense of community associated with the school, but as new people have moved into the school district from all parts of the United States and other countries, the sense of community is not as strong as it once was. The majority of the students enrolled in Harrison Elementary are Caucasian, roughly 85%. Approximately 12% of the population is Latino/Hispanic, and 3% of the population consists of other races and ethnicities.

When walking through the hallways of McKlesky Elementary, the school of another participant, one is immediately struck by the inviting, quiet, calm, nurturing environment that is pervasive throughout the school. According to the administration, one reason for this atmosphere is due to the distinct character qualities that teachers, parents, and students possess in the school community. McKlesky was built in 1996 and averages
a stable enrollment of around 555 students in grades K through six. McKlesky is one of several elementary schools in the system that has been designated to serve students with disabilities from around the zone. From this diversity comes a genuine acceptance and respect of student differences. The community is comprised of predominantly white, middle class, dual-income families. The majority of the students enrolled in McKlesky Elementary are Caucasian, roughly 85%. Approximately 5% of the population is Hispanic, 5% of the enrollment is composed of African American students, and 5% of the population consists of other races and ethnicities.

Walton Elementary, the school of a third participant in the study, currently serves over 1,010 students in grades K through five. The current facility opened in 2004, funded by a 1997 SPLOST referendum. Beginning in the 2001-2002 school year, Walton Elementary qualified for Title I School-Wide status. Under the leadership of the current administration comes a distinct feeling of family. Administration asserts that each student truly comes to a place where his or her educational goals are the focus of the entire faculty and staff. As the school community addresses these changes, the needs of the students will continue to be the driving force for school planning and improvement. The majority of the students enrolled in Walton Elementary are Caucasian, roughly 58%. Approximately 20% of the population is Hispanic, 14% of the enrollment is composed of African American students, and 8% of the population consists of other races and ethnicities. Approximately 49% of the student population is on free or reduced lunch.

**The self-contained classroom.** The classroom environment for the students with intellectual disabilities at Walton Elementary School was welcoming and colorful. The environment was very academic, with letters, shapes, and numbers very visible for the
students. The teacher consistently takes pictures for display to showcase the students’
work and accomplishments. The classroom was located toward the front of the building,
not far from the main office. A restroom was not incorporated into the classroom, so the
students had to utilize the one down the hallway from the classroom. The environment
was filled with a large variety of equipment and technology due to the physical and
educational needs of the students. The students in this classroom are eligible for special
education services under the category of Severe/Profound Intellectual Disabilities. One of
the students was also autistic in addition to the intellectual disability. There were four
students total, two of whom were in wheelchairs. Two of the students had limited speech,
and the other two students were non-verbal.

The classroom at McKlesky Elementary was set up very differently. There was an
abundance of space available due to the classroom being a portion of a whole suite that
included a therapy room, restroom, kitchen area, and teacher office. The classroom,
located toward the back of the school, was moderately decorated and very organized. It
contained a variety of sensory and adapted equipment for the students to access, as well
as a separate desk area with a computer for student use. The students seemed to have
access to everything they needed without leaving the classroom suite. The students in this
classroom are eligible for special education services under the category of Severe/
Profound Intellectual Disabilities with the majority of the student functioning in the range
of profound intellectual disabilities. There were three students attending school and one
student being served through Hospital/Homebound services. Of the three students in the
classroom, one was in a wheelchair, and all of the students were non-verbal.
The final classroom, located at Harrison Elementary School, was spangled with academic accessories. The environment was very colorful and busy, with a variety of curriculum content visuals. The classroom was organized into center-type areas that included a computer station, morning group area, work table with the teacher, and a work table with the therapists and/or paraprofessional. Each student had his or her own individual desk with a place for their belongings. There was not a restroom facility within the classroom; therefore, the students accessed the restroom located on the same hallway as the classroom. There were four students total in the classroom, one of whom was in a wheelchair. The students in this classroom are eligible for special education services under the category of Moderate Intellectual Disabilities with one student also identified as deaf/hard of hearing.

The students with intellectual disabilities in all three classes function below grade level academically and also exhibit limitations in adapted behavior.

Some of the students will be able to learn the academic, social, and vocational skills that enable them to live independently or semi-independently as productive adult citizens. Others’ learning will be more limited, and they may need more intensive services throughout their lives.

(Friend & Bursuck, 2006)

The amount of information the students learn may be limited and the rate at which they learn may be slower than that of their typical peers. These students require significant ongoing practice of skills and often have difficulty generalizing a learned skill from one setting or situation another setting or situation.
Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative research methods were used for this study in order to investigate the following research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

The data for this multiple-case study were collected during the summer of 2010 and first semester of the 2010-2011 school year. Multiple data sources were incorporated (see Appendix B) to include in-depth biographical interviews (see Appendix C), open-ended interviews (see Appendix D), observations, a Curriculum Ideologies Inventory (see Appendix E), and visual documents (teacher collages) (see Appendices F and G).

In-depth biographical interviews. The in-depth biographical interviews were used in conjunction with open-ended interviews. The biographical interview asked
questions (Appendix C) about the participants’ personal histories, such as, “How many years have you been teaching in the area of special education?” The interviews were recorded and each conversation was transcribed. Using the in-depth interviews helped to frame the perspectives of the participants’ responses to the open-ended questions, allowing the participants to place their lived experiences within a structural context.

**Open-ended interviews.** Open-ended interviews were used as the primary method to conduct this inquiry. Guiding questions (Appendix D) were used to answer the major research question guiding this study. The question allowed the participant to express his/her beliefs, biases, and assumptions, such as, “How would you define equity in education?” Data collection for the interviews was conducted using adequate recording, such as a microphone that is sensitive to the acoustics of the room. This method of data collection involved transcribing the conversation.

**Observations.** Classroom observations were conducted in three sessions per teacher, for approximately 30-60 minutes each session. The times were varied to allow observation of a variety of activities with each teacher. At Walton Elementary, I was able to observe morning group, reading, and science. I had the opportunity to observe math, reading, and morning group at Harrison Elementary, and at McClesky Elementary, I observed breakfast, reading, and a curriculum activity with the teacher and an individual student. Throughout the observations for this study, I attempted to be aware of and identify the teachers’ behaviors, pedagogy, and verbal interactions. Data collection for the observations was conducted using anecdotal field notes. The notes were both descriptive and reflective. They consisted of information such as portraits of the teacher, the physical setting, particular events and activities, and the researcher’s experiences,
hunches, and learning relative to teaching students with intellectual disabilities.

Describing the students’ opportunities for access to general education curriculum is one example of a descriptive note taken during one observation.

**Curriculum Ideologies Inventory.** Curriculum ideologies refer to “people’s endeavors while they engage in curriculum activity or think about curriculum issues” (Schiro, 2008, p. 10). The description of the ideologies presented in this inventory emerges from the analysis of actions and beliefs of American educators (Schiro, 2008). The Curriculum Ideologies Inventory (see Appendix E) is a rating scale that spans six educational topics. The six topics are (a) the purpose of school; (b) how teachers should instruct children; (c) what school learning consists of; (d) the type of knowledge that should be taught in school; (e) the inherent nature of children; and (f) how children should be assessed. There are four position statements attached to each area that are representative of each of the four major curricular ideologies, which are (a) learner-centered, (b) social efficacy, (c) social reconstruction, and (d) scholar academic. These ideologies represent the current range of beliefs among those interested in curriculum because each has clearly identifiable roots in and influences on American education (Schiro, 2008, p. 11).

**Learner-centered ideology.** This ideology is characterized by the educator’s allegiance to curriculum that focuses on the learner and the learner’s interests. Proponents of this ideology believe that school should be an organic setting where knowledge is constructed by the learner himself. Within this ideological model, educators resonate with the belief that the most important aspect of knowledge involves knowledge’s origins and
that these origins are subjective in nature. Workers in a Montessori School setting would be aligned ideologically to the learner-centered ideology.

**Social efficiency ideology.** In the current era of standardized testing and assessment, the social efficiency ideology is a much-supported model. Proponents of this ideology resonate with the belief that children are pre-adults who need to be guided in curricular tasks that help them develop into productive, socially-capable, and responsible adults. Knowledge is objective in nature, and educators aligned to this ideology believe that the most important feature of knowledge involves the uses to which knowledge is put. Workers in typical P-12 schools are currently entrenched in the social efficiency model.

**Social reconstruction ideology.** Proponents of this ideology view knowledge as subjective in nature and constructed out of social interactions for social, political, economic, or cultural purposes. As with the social efficiency ideology, educators aligned with this ideological bent prefer to view the uses to which knowledge is put as its most significant aspect. Workers involved in raising awareness of key social, political, or ecological issues reflect a social reconstruction ideology.

**Scholar academic ideology.** Proponents of this belief find themselves privileging the objective origins of knowledge, such as those represented by the great cultural, literal, and societal works of our society. Educators who endorse apprentice learning and information processing are aligned with the scholar academic ideology. Those who ascribe to this ideology view the teacher as the primary transmitter of knowledge to those neophytes whose knowledge will accumulate with time and experience. Workers within
the academic disciplines (i.e., university or high school settings) are prone to operating from a scholar academic perspective.

Respondents in the current study were asked to rank four statements connected to each of the six educational topics. Each statement represented a particular ideology. Respondents registered their preferences by ranking the statement that they most agreed with, the statement that they least agreed with, and the remaining two in-between. Respondents wrote their answers directly on the inventory form. The scoring procedure involved placing each statement in ranked order on a scoring form. In this way, the scoring form revealed the ideology to which the participant was most aligned and least aligned. This information provided a basis for understanding what the participants teach and how they justify their curricular and instructional decisions in the classroom (Kliebard, 1982, p. 12).

**Visual documents (teacher collages).** The participants were asked to complete two collages after the interview data were collected, providing them an opportunity to reflect on their own ideologies and pedagogy. A prompt (Appendix F) was given to each participant for both collages, and the participant was asked to make a collage related to each prompt he/she was given. I used the following prompts: “How would you visually represent the curriculum for the students in your classroom?” and “If you had unlimited resources, how would you visually represent the curriculum for the students in your classroom?” The participants were allowed to use pictures from a variety of sources, such as magazines, catalogs, etc., or take their own photographs. I met with the participants and had them describe each of their collages. The descriptions were recorded and
transcribed. Interpretation consisted of the participants’ perspective as well as the perspectives of the researcher.

Within this study, the collages offered a compelling way of understanding the participants’ thinking and experiences.

For qualitative researchers, visual data is an approach that can be used, in collaboration with observation and interviews, to unpick how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight.

(Banks, 2008, p. x)

For this study, the use of the collages along with the interviews, observation, and curriculum inventory provided a rich picture of the participants’ perspectives related to providing equitable learning opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities.

**Analysis**

In evaluating the results, I practiced reflexivity, a process of self-examination and self-disclosure about aspects of one’s background, identity or subjectivities, and assumptions that influence data collection and interpretation. Data analysis and interpretational findings were approached through an inductive and recursive process, expecting patterns, categories, or themes to evolve as data collection proceeded.

The prominent method of analysis for this study is pattern-matching. According to Yin (2009), this type of logic compares patterns of results obtained from a study with patterns from past studies, knowledge, or theory. Internal validity is enhanced when the patterns coincide. Pattern matching always involves an attempt to link two patterns where one is a theoretical pattern and the other is an observed or operational one. In the
theoretical pattern, the theory might originate from a formal tradition of theorizing, might be the ideas or hunches of the investigator, or might arise from some combination of these. The observed or operational pattern is broadly meant to include direct observation in the form of impressions, field notes, and the like, as well as more formal objective measures. The inferential task involves the attempt to relate, link, or match these two patterns. To the extent that the patterns match, one can conclude that the theory and any other theories that might predict the same observed pattern receive support. Creswell (2007) contends that in case study analysis, the researcher establishes patterns and looks for a correspondence between two or more categories. These patterns can then be compared and contrasted with published literature.

**Procedures.** Data analysis procedures for this study began by transcribing the taped interviews. The transcribing was followed by sorting or sifting through the observation field notes, interview transcriptions from the open-ended questions and the descriptions of the collages, interview notes, and responses to the ideology inventory data to identify similar phrases, relationships between themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences. Codes were affixed to the data and used to retrieve and organize the chunks of descriptive or inferential information compiled. As the researcher, I gradually elaborated a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database and confront those generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories. A computer program, Atlas TI, was used to assist in managing the large volume of data. It enabled me, as the researcher, to easily manipulate the data and conduct searches. Graphic displays of the codes and categories were developed using this program. Finally, the
expertise of an advising professor was sought in analyzing both the visual data and the ideology inventory.

**Triangulation.** In order to consider and respect the validity and reliability, this study shows evidence of triangulation. Validity in critical ethnographic research refers to the extent to which observations and measurements are a true representation of some reality. Reliability refers to replicability of the research findings. Validity and reliability in research can be achieved through triangulated data. Triangulation seeks to quickly examine existing data to strengthen interpretations and improve policy and programs based on the available evidence. According to Creswell (2007), triangulation involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective. Triangulation occurs when the events or facts of a case study have been supported by more than a single source of evidence, which in this study includes interviews, observations, visual data, and curriculum ideology inventory. The purpose of triangulation in the study was to use two or more data collection methods within research to enhance the comprehensiveness of data, to put the interpretations in context, and to explore a variety of similar and dissimilar viewpoints. Triangulation methods for this study included: (a) varied data sources, (b) member checking, and (c) review of the literature. The literature was used to support or refute findings, and this is a valuable tool for triangulation. Member checking is a process used in which the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. I asked the participants to examine the raw data collected during the study and to provide critical observations or interpretations (Creswell, 2007). I was interested in their views of the data collected as well as what is missing.
**Trustworthiness.** Examination of trustworthiness is crucial to ensure reliability in qualitative research. Research findings should be as trustworthy as possible, and every research study must be evaluated in relation to the procedures used to generate the findings. The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). There is no single correct meaning or universal application of research findings, but only the most probable meaning from a particular perspective. In qualitative research, trustworthiness of interpretations refers to establishing arguments for the most probable interpretations. Trustworthiness will increase if the findings are presented in a way that allows the reader to look for alternative interpretations.

**Bias.** Case study, the research method of this study, allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2009, p.4). I find myself having played a crucial role in the data gathering and interpretation of that world. As an observer, I uncovered a series of tales of teacher experiences, including my own. In this study, I accepted the notion that an author can never be truly objective, nor can the studies, events, people, places, and situations be entirely true, concretely factual, or objectively representative. Instead of attempting to remove myself from the study and pretend that my assumptions and interpretations about teachers and instruction are correct and irrefutable, I made my presence in the study explicit. My role as the researcher was to respond to occurrences and evoke emotions and thoughts, rather than try to define a given event or situation.

Bias serves both positive and negative functions. In this study, for example, one positive effect of bias was the explicit acknowledgement that it exists. Bias is hard, if not
impossible, to eliminate from the data collection and analysis stages of the study, and it becomes necessary to acknowledge and account for it, rather than trying to remove it. If controlled, bias in this study can focus and limit the research effort. If uncontrolled, bias can undermine the quality of critical ethnographic research. Within this study, it could distort results and affect the findings. To control bias, I refrained from asking biased questions and asked for clarifications. I also challenged answers tactfully and used indirect questions that dealt with socially sensitive subjects. Throughout the study, it was important to strive for objectivity, understanding that feelings, attitudes, and personality can distort analysis and reporting. In the current study, triangulation, contextualization, and a nonjudgmental orientation all played an important role in reducing bias.

**Critical approach.** Within the case study, I used a critical approach to examine what motivates teachers to hold high expectations for students with intellectual disabilities and thus utilize a curriculum using general education tools of instruction to bring these students to higher levels of learning. A critical perspective applies a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry. The central premise is that one can be both scientific and critical, and that description offers a powerful means of analyzing culture and the role of research within it. Employing a critical perspective begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This study illuminates how power, control, and ideology dominate our understanding of reality. Therefore, I carefully explored how social life is produced and privileged by those in power.

Using a critical approach in this study situated the research in a social context to consider how knowledge is shaped by the values of human agents and communities,
implicated in power differences, and favorable for democratizing relationships and institutions. Thomas (2003) states that a critical perspective proceeds from an explicit framework that, by modifying consciousness or invoking a call to action, attempts to use knowledge for social change. This approach was well suited to answer the research questions and provoke a societal change within the education of students with intellectual disabilities.

This study was conducted with a set of methodological tools oriented to studying social phenomena in the natural environments in which they are situated. As the researcher, I interacted with the research participants in their own languages and environments. I used observation in order to gain firsthand knowledge about the practices and perspectives of teachers, their behaviors, and the rationales for their behaviors. Within this study the participants were key foci. I attempted to uncover teacher beliefs, assumptions, and biases in order to understand their perceptions and ideologies in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Tensions.** Tensions implicit in the investigation with complexity and openness, evidenced throughout a critical approach, lend themselves to contributing to an evolving research design. Acknowledgment and consideration of tensions, or lack thereof, could change the dynamics of the study. One such tension is between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives. As the researcher, my relative outsider status and generalized etic perspectives offered interpretive angles that were not available to the insiders. During an observation for this study, for example, I was an outsider entering the classroom with preconceived notions as to what the instruction for the students should look like although,
as the researcher, I was viewing the situation and events objectively, relinquishing my biases and assumptions in this situation.

An additional tension evident in critical ethnography was between interpreting and explaining. Critical perspectives recognize that culture-as-ideology can lead to certain misinterpretations of social life. Similarly, a culture that is merely lived out is not always open to critical reflection for insiders. With sufficient respect and sensitivity to the community, I attempted to explain some of the questions/contradictions left open in the informants’ interpretations of things.

Another tension existed between the parts and the whole of the culture. To explain away the tensions in a culture is to impose a consistency and uniformity on the community that serves to stereotype, essentialize, and generalize its culture reductively. Thus, a critical interpretation, as used in this study, represents the culture in all its complexity, instability, and diversity.

A final tension to acknowledge was between the different subject positions of the researcher. I adopted a reflexive approach; interpreted my own biases, backgrounds, and identities (e.g., of scholarship, ethnicity, class, gender, region) both in the field and outside; and acknowledged the ways they shape the research and cultural representation. Acknowledging these tensions as a researcher assisted this study in evolving the role of the researcher from an etic to emic perspective. Attention to a critical interpretation of culture and adopting a reflexive approach as a researcher built collaborative experiences between the researcher and participant.
My Positionality as a Researcher

The examination of the perspectives of the special education teachers in this study afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my own pedagogy and assumptions toward providing equitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities. My passion for working with students with disabilities began in high school. I volunteered in a church program that provided a variety of services for this population. I remember vividly being so excited to work with the children and assist them in their therapy. I arrived at the church and inquired about where the program was taking place. The person assisting me stated “they are in the basement.” From that moment on I was bothered by what I heard. How could this program put these students in a basement to work with them? Was there not another space in the entire facility that they could access, allowing the children opportunity to interact with others in the community?

I thought I could put these thoughts out of my mind until I saw the amazing children with disabilities being provided services in a room that was dark, had no windows, and was bare except for the few pieces of equipment used with the children. I will never forget feeling that this situation was extremely unjust for a population that needed extensive support and encouragement from their community. From the first day assisting with this program, I knew that I wanted to work in the area of special education in order to be a voice for those who could not be heard but have the right to be afforded equitable opportunities.

I continued volunteering in the program at the church for 12 weeks. The time spent with the children with disabilities in the basement enhanced my awareness of the beliefs and assumptions that society held for this marginalized population. Students with
disabilities were not visible in any of the schools I attended through high school. Actually, I have little recollection of seeing individuals with disabilities in the community. I began to question why I rarely came in contact with students with disabilities and wondered how and where they went to school.

My experience at college confirmed one of my assumptions, that students with disabilities do not have access to the same opportunities as those offered their typical peers. I was given a project in one of my special education courses that involved going to a residential facility for individuals with disabilities and psychological impairments. I went with a group of 50 students, and after the first visit, only 20 students remained in the program, with me being one of them. I had never seen such a variation in significance of disability, but what really stood out in my mind was the fact that residents had no access to resources such as manipulatives, books, television, movies, or music. They also were not provided any type of curricular or instructional opportunities. This lack of opportunities generated negative responses in the residents, including self-mutilating behaviors.

My project was to provide the residents with auditory and visual stimulation to see if the self-mutilating behaviors were reduced. I brought about 15 residents into a room and played music while flashing pictures on the wall. The self-mutilating behavior decreased by about 80%. What I realized when working with the individuals with disabilities was that the staff was very negative and had low expectations for these individuals. My experience in working with them resulted in awareness that these individuals could do much more than what was expected of them. I have carried this experience throughout my career, always remembering to keep high expectations,
regardless of the degree of disability, and maintain teaching practices that provide all students, including those with intellectual disabilities, challenging learning opportunities.

This past year I began my 23rd year of teaching students with intellectual disabilities in a school system different from those in my previous experience. My current position is teacher of students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities who are also severely medically fragile. This immediately brought back memories of my college experience in the residential facility. It seemed that my experiences had come full circle, and I knew I had to rely on my belief that all students can learn. The students in my class had minimal exposure to the grade-level curriculum and few opportunities to make choices. The first two weeks in my new classroom were spent identifying a way for all of my students to respond to yes/no questions. This allowed them to make choices and complete activities using challenging curriculum. Throughout the school year the students have been held to high expectations and had numerous opportunities to participate in grade-level curriculum activities.

I often reflect on the importance of keeping a perspective of justice when making curricular and instructional decisions. Cochran-Smith (2008) asserts that teaching practices that enhance social justice involve how teachers think about their work and interpret what is going on in schools and classrooms; how they understand competing agendas and make decisions; how they form relationships with students; and how they work with colleagues, families, communities, and social groups (p.15). I continue to practice these ideas throughout my teaching career. The selection of the topic for this study came from my passion to continue striving for a more socially just education for students with intellectual disabilities.
Assumptions

Throughout my career in education, I developed my own assumptions about students with intellectual disabilities. These assumptions are based on 23 years of experience teaching students with intellectual disabilities, school-wide observations and support throughout the district, and continued studies in the field. The following assumptions lie within the context of three areas: (a) equity in learning opportunities, (b) teacher expectations, and (c) student achievement.

An overarching assumption I held regarding this body of work was that students with intellectual disabilities have the right to equitable learning opportunities compared to those provided to their typically developing peers. Learning opportunities for typically developing peers includes instruction using the general education curriculum. Ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum was a key feature of the 1997 amendments to IDEA. Under these general curriculum mandates, all students should have access to a challenging curriculum. It is my personal view, as stated by Astin (1982), that equity of learning opportunities involves two issues: the number of available opportunities and their relative quality. Education should be viewed as an investment in students at any ability level, as long as the investment pays off in the form of continued intellectual growth and development.

A second assumption that I held was that teacher beliefs and expectations affect the instruction of students with intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, there has been too little consideration of how students with intellectual disabilities achieve access to the general curriculum, and many educators believe that such efforts are not relevant to this population. I agree with Wehmeyer et al. (2001) when they state that teachers form
expectations according to special education labels independent of other information about student capacity – with students with intellectual disabilities held to the lowest expectations. I feel that students with disabilities work harder and achieve more when they are held to higher expectations. Teachers need to be sure that their own assumptions and biases are not blocking a student’s ability to progress.

Finally, I maintain that students with intellectual disabilities can learn and benefit from instruction using the general education curriculum. There is evidence to show that when students with intellectual disabilities have access to the general education setting, they are engaged in tasks linked to the general education curriculum (McLaughlin, 2010; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005; Wehmeyer et al., 2001). Conversely, students with more significant intellectual disabilities, who are served in a self-contained classroom, work on IEP goal-related activities. This is an indication of the inadequacy of the existing general education curriculum to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities, low teacher expectations, and the ineffective meshing of general education curriculum with IEP goals and objectives.

Teachers are held accountable for instruction based on the student’s IEP and general education standards during alternate assessment. For accountability purposes, the student must show progress on general education standards. If the teaching instruction is such that this can be accomplished during alternate assessment, then why does access to the general education curriculum have to diminish during all other instructional times? I believe that instruction for students with intellectual disabilities can be a combination of general education curriculum and functional curriculum. During the data collection for
alternate assessment, teachers are held accountable for providing more challenging curriculum, and students are being held to higher expectations.

**Summary**

This study utilized a case study method framed by a critical ethnography approach to investigate the following research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

Throughout this study, I focused on what propels some teachers to provide access to, and excellence in, general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. My sources included interview, observation, visual document, and Curriculum Ideologies Inventory. I gained insight into the perspectives of each teacher related to his/her instruction and providing equitable learning opportunities for his/her
students. It was anticipated that this research would be used as an avenue to invoke social consciousness and societal change within the educational environment for students with intellectual disabilities. A major objective was to assist teachers in looking beyond a functional curriculum, so that they may provide equitable learning opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities.

The next chapters include the results and a summary of the study. Chapter four will present interpretive findings and results based upon the in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, Curriculum Ideology Inventory surveys, and the visual document (collage). Chapter five will use observation data and open-ended interviews to provide a description of typical curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities, discussing what the teachers have in common regarding what they teach and how they teach. Chapter six will provide a summary and discussion of findings to include the importance to P-12 education. This chapter will also integrate the findings into the conceptual framework of social justice. In addition, chapter six will reveal implications for practice, policy, and future research, as well as limitations and recommendations based on results of the data.
CHAPTER FOUR: CHANGE IN EDUCATION:
FINDING MEANING IN OUR OWN VOICE

Introduction

Beginning in the 1960s, laws in individual states have been chipping away at the harsh realities that encompass the education of students with intellectual disabilities. The efforts of parents of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as increased awareness on the part of educational establishments, led to the development of the provisions of what became PL 94-142, which established the right of access to public education for students with disabilities and broadened the scope of services provided by the schools (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Lipsky and Gartner (1989) refer to the implementation of PL 94-142 as one of the finest achievements of public education, citing that students previously excluded from public education would finally be served, and additional resources would be committed. Achievements in the implementation of the law include: (a) access, (b) a general recognition and acceptance of entitlement to education of students with disabilities, and (c) some limited progress on mainstreaming students with disabilities into general education classrooms.

Less progress has been made in the quality of education provided. While PL 94-142 established the rights of students with disabilities to be treated equally and on an individual basis in determining their school needs, it was still difficult to treat the students with disabilities as part of the mainstream. Without adjusting the organization of services within the school, changing attitudes towards disability, and altering the state
and local funding streams that make it difficult to treat students with disabilities as part of the mainstream, PL 94-142 may have served to reinforce a hybrid structure – one with elaborate protections to ensure the rights of students with disabilities, but carried out by a separate delivery system of special education services. The operation of parallel programs and systems for general education students and those labeled as intellectually disabled is both cause and consequence of these limits.

If the law has been massively successful in assigning responsibility for students and setting up mechanisms to assure that schools carry out those responsibilities, it has been less successful in removing the barriers between general and special education. PL 94-142 and other public policies of the time did not anticipate the need to take special steps to eliminate turf, professional, attitudinal, and knowledge barriers within public education. It did not anticipate that the artifice of delivery systems in schools might drive the maintenance of separate services and keep students from the mainstream, that the resource base for special education and other remedial services would be constrained by economic forces, or that special education might continue to be dead-end programs in many school districts. Nor could it anticipate how deeply ingrained were our assumptions about the differences between students with learning problems and those without, and the substantial power of high (or, unfortunately, low) expectations in learning. (Walker, 1987, p. 109)

The U.S. educational system is expected to offer many benefits to students with disabilities; among them include high levels of instruction and a level playing field for all
students. Nearly all schools claim to hold high expectations for all students. In reality, however, what is professed is not always practiced. Although some schools and teachers maintain uniformly high expectations for all students, others have great expectations for particular segments of the student population but minimal expectations for others (Lumsden, 1997). Cotton (1989) asserts that students who are perceived to be low in ability, such as students with intellectual disabilities, may also be given fewer opportunities to learn new material, asked less stimulating questions, given briefer and less informative feedback, praised less frequently for success, called on less frequently, and given less time to respond than students who are considered high in ability.

Cotton (1989) referenced the following excerpt from George Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion:

...You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (p. 1)

Just as the character, Eliza Doolittle, suggests that a person's place in society is largely a matter of how he or she is treated by others, the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study concluded that students’ intellectual development is largely a response to what teachers expect and how those expectations are communicated (Cotton, 1989, p.1). Either consciously or unconsciously, teachers often behave differently toward students based on the beliefs and assumptions they have about them. For example, studies have found that
teachers engage in affirming nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, leaning toward, and making eye contact with students more frequently when they believe they are dealing with high-ability students than when they believe they are interacting with slow students (Bamburg, 1994). Hargreaves (1994, as cited by Carrington, 1999) reminds us that a teaching culture includes beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of performing among the school community. It has been argued that cultures of teaching help give meaning, support, and identity to teachers and their work. The identities and work of the participants in this study are examined in this chapter.

The findings in this chapter are guided by the first major question of this study:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

In the first section of this chapter, the personalities, perspectives and experiential backgrounds of the participants of the study are introduced. The next section of the chapter presents the participants’ perspectives in relation to the purpose of school, teaching, learning, the knowledge of most worth, and evaluation. In the final section, the participants’ views of the meaning of curriculum and the purpose curriculum serves are explicated and discussed. Pseudonyms were used throughout the discussion of participant responses.

Visions of Education

The three participants in this study were asked to reveal and discuss their beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations relating to the education of students with intellectual disabilities. The following perspectives were drawn from interviews, collages,
and an ideologies inventory: the purposes of schooling, the knowledge of most worth, expectations for their students, beliefs about teaching and learning, the essence of childhood, and assumptions about curriculum, and student evaluation. These data sources and components were used based on my assertion that teachers’ beliefs, assumptions, and expectations have a differential impact on the way they teach, present curriculum, and evaluate their students’ success. Schiro (1978) contends that we must understand the ideologies of curriculum workers [teachers]: the driving myths that motivate teachers to take the value positions do; the theoretical gestalts that cause teachers to conceive of curriculum as they do; and the conceptual frameworks that are utilized by teachers when thinking about and acting upon curricular issues (p.6). The ideology inventory was critical to this study, bringing forward the participants’ own personal educational philosophies and how their beliefs have evolved over the span of their careers. The interviews and collages were crucial data sources as they allowed the participants opportunities to express their opinions and beliefs about curriculum and evaluation, as well as their expectations, in relation to their students.

**Turning Mirrors into Windows**

There is a diversity of beliefs about the purpose of schooling or education (Yero, 2002). Some will place the focus on knowledge, some on the teacher, and others on the student. Yet one’s beliefs in the purpose of education lie at the heart of one’s own teaching behaviors (Yero, 2002). Yero asserts that there is no definition of education that all, or even most, educators agree upon. The meanings they attach to the word are complex beliefs arising from their own values and experiences.
Many of the conflicts surrounding education are the result of multiple points of view as to the purpose of education, the definition of knowledge, and the arguments over which knowledge or whose knowledge is of most worth. Many take the position that the purpose of education is to enable individuals to reach their full potential as human beings, individually, and as members of a society; this means that these individuals will receive an education that will enable them to think and act intelligently and purposefully in exercising and protecting the Rights and Responsibilities claimed by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the American Dream (Shaw, 2010).

Maria (cancer survivor) describes the purpose of school as an avenue to expose the students with disabilities to the students in general education. She explained her position this way, “They may not get that at home…as well as expose the general education kids to our students, which is extremely important.” Maria emphasized the importance of students with disabilities being recognized as members of society. She posits that one way to achieve this is to make students with disabilities visible in the school environment and provide opportunities for reciprocal communication between students with severe/profound disabilities and the general education population. Maria revealed a situation at her school that reinforces the importance of students with disabilities being recognized and accepted as members of the community:

One time one of my students went up to her…and he had slobber all over his hands and all that and she totally freaked out. Like, “oh my gosh, oh my gosh, get him away!” So I had to go over and grab him. So it’s almost like she’s terrified. And right before we left for the holiday break, she said that her daughter…she saw her daughter walking with a special ed kid and
her daughter was totally fine, like working with the kid and…she just couldn’t believe her daughter was so comfortable around them, especially when she is so uncomfortable around them. And she told me about that and I said, well, what I try to do a lot is I try to get a lot of the students here used to growing up with them. I remember when I was in school, there weren’t any special needs students. They all went to a different school. The only time I was ever around any special needs people is like when I ran into one at the grocery store or whatever and even then, I did stare. It’s different. And so it’s something that, you know, it would have been good to have special needs students in the school so that I would be more comfortable as I was growing up. And so it’s very important, having these kids in the school system.

Sandra (nurturer) views the purpose of school from a very functional perspective. She contends that the purpose is “to give some life skills, to prepare you for the world and to take care of yourself. I’m thinking about general skills…how to take care of yourself, read a paper, drive, social skills and all that.”

Based on their responses to the prompt that asks about the purpose of school given on the ideology inventory, Maria and Sandra both agree that schools should efficiently fulfill the needs of society by training youth to function as mature constructive members of society. Schiro (2008) argues that the educators, whose perspectives emerge in this social efficiency ideology, believe that the aim of education is two-fold: first, to perpetuate the functioning of society, and second, to prepare the individual to lead a meaningful adult life in society. Educators who find themselves aligned with the social
efficiency ideology view themselves as instruments furthering the development of a future society superior to the existent one and not as proponents of the status quo (Schiro, 2008, p. 64). Maria’s and Sandra’s responses indicate their desire to help society see individuals with disabilities as members of the community and to look beyond the deficit thinking to understand that individuals with significant intellectual disabilities have strengths to which they can build upon. Poplin (1988) reminds us that deficit thinking emphasizes deficits over strengths and focuses on the teaching of discrete, task analyzed skills in the absence of context, meaning, and relevance. In accordance, Freire (1998) proposes that education should raise the awareness of the students, so that they become subjects, rather than objects, of the world. This can be conceptualized in this body of work as teaching all students, even those with significant intellectual disabilities, to think democratically and to continually question and make meaning from (critically view) everything they learn.

Riley (musician turned teacher) has a slightly different perspective on the purpose of school. She suggests that the purpose of school is “to prepare students for the world that we live in – to teach them things they need to know, and expose them to knowledge that will help them understand how/why things are the way they are.” This statement correlates with Riley’s response on the ideology inventory about schools, indicating that schools should be communities where youth learn the knowledge accumulated by their culture. Schiro (2008) proposes those teachers who ascribe to the scholar academic ideology view the formal education that takes place in schools as a process of acculturating children into society in such a way that they become good citizens. Hirsch (1987, as cited by Schiro, 2008) claims that this involves teaching children “the basic
information needed to thrive in the modern world” as a culturally literate adult (p. 37). This basic information consists of shared knowledge, which includes the background knowledge that literate adults use to understand each other and the events in their world, as well as, “the shared attitudes and conventions that color” their understanding of human interactions and events (Schiro, 2008, p. 38).

In our face-to-face discussion related to what they felt to be true about education, all three teachers expressed their belief in the importance of education in our society. Although Riley and Maria make reference to negative issues that exist within the administrative level of education, all three maintain that education is important for all children. Riley posits:

We all know that the system has a lot of issues that are very discouraging, but everyone needs education! It is extremely important for all children to learn as much as they can in order to be the best that they can.

Maria agrees with Riley when asked what she knows to be true about education stating:

There’s an amazing amount of potential to make it just amazing…but, some of the bureaucracy, some of the people just had to turn it into something…that I know at times…it can be very frustrating. But it really does have the potential to be something truly amazing and to truly change the world.

Sandra (nurturer) takes a more tolerant perspective, maintaining that she feels the people who are making the decisions for educators really have the best interests at the forefront. She reiterated that she thinks that is true about education. She continued to assert that she did not know if the decision makers in education always made the right
decisions or carried them out. She was adamant that “the board of education has the right values in mind,” but then stated “I don’t really know.” Sandra contends that her beliefs have changed over time, and that she is more experienced and has held leadership roles where she “knows things are being done right.” Sandra believes that education is “going backwards” stating, “There is no money in the budget so it seems like we’re going backwards to 15 to 20 years ago.” She claims that things have gone “downhill” for her. Hall and Loucks (1982) assert that changes in teacher beliefs are generally not affected by reading and applying the findings of education research. Instead, teachers appear to obtain most of their ideas from actual practice, primarily from their own and then from the practice of fellow teachers (Zahorik, 1987). Through previous experiences, Sandra’s beliefs of education have changed, and it appears that her perspective of the budget and the direction of the curriculum has become somewhat negative.

Maria (cancer survivor) shared a similar perspective to Sandra’s in that her beliefs about education, including resources and opportunities for students with significant intellectual disabilities, had changed in this way:

A lot… well every experience changes me a little bit. It kind of opens my eyes to maybe possibly something new or to try something different. Or maybe to not do this because it didn’t turn out the way I liked… I mean different experiences can be better in some ways… it can challenge my thoughts on how something is….

Kagan (1992) says that teacher beliefs are stable and resistant to change, even in the face of contradictory evidence such as reason, time, or experience. Pajares (1992) goes further:
Belief change during adulthood is a relatively rare phenomenon, the most common cause being a conversion from one authority to another or a gestalt shift. Individuals tend to hold on to beliefs based on incorrect or incomplete knowledge, even after scientifically correct explanations are presented to them. (p. 325)

Pajares (1992) also believes that beliefs about teaching are well established by the time a student goes to college. What this essentially means is that teacher beliefs or beliefs about teaching are formed early, are difficult to change, and may not be based on rationality nor on the latest educational research (Lucas, 2005).

In contrast to the literature, Sandra and Maria clearly indicated that their beliefs about education had changed, and in an interview with both, they alluded to the fact that the changes came about through experiences that each had encountered. Some studies reveal that belief development and change is possible, but it is gradual, cumulative, and highly variable among individual teachers. Findings also suggest that certain beliefs are more susceptible to change than others. (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Lightbrown & Spada, 1993).

Riley (musician turned teacher) revealed that her beliefs about education had not necessarily changed; instead they have evolved over time. She said:

I have seen how important it is for my students to be included with the regular education students – in non-academic settings, not only for the benefit of my students, but just as much for the benefit of the regular education population. It teaches them lessons that can’t be taught in the
classroom – tolerance, empathy, kindness, etc. Education isn’t only about academics.

Riley contends that her beliefs have evolved through her own school experience of seeing students with disabilities in isolated settings. It appears clear from the interviews and results from the ideology survey that Sandra, Maria, and Riley strongly believe that students with intellectual disabilities should have opportunities to participate in society, and that society should have opportunities to interact with students with intellectual disabilities. All three teachers have a desire to turn mirrors into windows, allowing all students to go beyond just looking at themselves to look through the window at the real world.

**The greatest act of optimism.** Pajares (1992) reminds us that all teachers hold beliefs about their work, students, subject and roles, and responsibilities. For example, if a teacher believes that all students have an equal ability to learn, this belief will be reflected in methodology and teaching style (Lucas, 2005). Woods (1993) points out that the personal dispositions and experiences accumulated over the years help shape the professional role of teacher as it is subjectively experienced, meaning we are products of our experiences and environments, and that is reflected in our profession. Teachers are carriers of either positive or negative behavior toward students. In our discussion about teaching and learning, Sandra described what she liked best about teaching:

> When I really start thinking about it, I think it’s a combination of a lot of things. I like being a part of a team, I like the structure, I like knowing what to expect, and I like getting attached to these children, but I have the tolerance and the patience…it may take somebody two years, and they
may finally reach a goal…I get so excited I boo-hoo and cry. So I guess it’s uh…rewarding. It’s the small things, the little things, that add up to the big picture.

Riley explained that she liked “being with the kids and helping them do their best” and seeing the progress that they make over the course of a year. Maria also viewed the idea of “helping” the students as part of what she likes best about teaching. She claims:

With my personality, I need to have face to face feedback. I want to help people, and I know some people help people as more of a desk job. That’s not me. I need to be in the trenches. I need to be with the kids. And so being able to do that every day is probably one of my favorite things.

It can be assumed by their responses in the interview that all three teachers acquire great satisfaction from helping the students achieve to the best of their ability. This was echoed in their conversations describing what it is about teaching that makes them feel important. Riley and Maria both specifically stated “knowing that they are helping children,” while Sandra maintains that being a leader for her children and having them rely on her makes her feel important. Sandra’s description of what makes her feel important is in accordance with her response to the ideology survey, the belief that the role of a teacher is to be an aid to children to help them learn by presenting them with experiences from which they can make meaning. Schiro (2008) tells us that this belief represents a learner centered ideology, which emphasizes the teacher as a trained observer, diagnostician of individual needs, presenter of environments, flexible resource, collaborator, and general facilitator of the learning requirements. It appears that Sandra’s
reference to being “a leader for her children” could indicate that the word leader represents a facilitator who provides learning opportunities.

Riley’s response to the role of the teacher on the ideology survey was identical to Sandra’s, reflecting the belief that the facilitation of child growth is based on the children’s needs. She described the qualities of an ideal teacher as someone who has high expectations for students, is organized, has leadership qualities, is flexible, and has the ability to work closely with many different individuals. Riley’s opinion of the qualities that are the mark of an ideal teacher are consistent with the beliefs of those who ascribe to the learner centered ideology.

Both Sandra’s and Riley’s views of the importance of leadership was brought forward in their discussion, Sandra by reflecting on her own leadership opportunities and Riley by indicating leadership as one characteristic of an ideal teacher. It appears that the role of leadership, according to their responses to the ideology survey, de-emphasizes the teacher as a deliverer of knowledge and a transmitter of answers. Instead, leadership is seen as facilitating growth through providing an instructional environment and responding to the student’s needs by adapting those responses to the differing styles and abilities of the students.

Maria (cancer survivor) views the role of the teacher as a manager of children as they encounter the learning conditions and materials, which includes preparing the environment in which students learn. Educators possessing this social efficiency ideology deem that teachers are to act in strict accordance with directions provided by the curriculum. They feel that teachers both prepare the environment in which children learn and manage the children as they learn (Schiro, 2008, p. 185). Schiro (2008) asserts that
part of preparing the environment consists of doing whatever is necessary to prepare the curriculum for use by students. In our discussion about teaching beliefs, Maria indicated that her current teaching profession had opened her eyes a little more to learning to accept everybody. She continued to assert that we need room for more expression, creativity, and thinking outside the box. In previous discussions, Maria expressed that she had learned to change an activity if one did not turn out being the best for the student. It appears that Maria does bring energy and enthusiasm in preparing the learning environment for students, and she seems to be shifting away from the confinement of the curriculum to make changes that align with the needs of her students who have significant intellectual disabilities.

The discussions on the role of the teacher lead to the teachers’ reflections on wholeheartedness. According to Dewey (1933), teachers who are wholehearted regularly examine their own assumptions, beliefs, and the results of their actions and approach all situations with the attitude that they can learn something new. Maria (cancer survivor) asserts that wholeheartedness is the ability to see beyond what we thought was capable. She described teachers who were wholehearted to be “people that never give up or quit.” Sandra (nurturer) describes wholeheartedness as having patience to teach students with disabilities and keeping expectations high. When asked about wholeheartedness, Riley (musician turned teacher) responded, “People always look at my students’ deficits instead of what they can do. I think what keeps us teaching is the fact that we look at the students’ assets and never give up.”

One characteristic common in all three teachers was optimism. They exhibited optimism through revealing their beliefs of high expectations and perseverance. It
appears that Maria, Sandra, and Riley are all striving to illuminate the assets in their students with hopes that others would relinquish their deficit thinking. Valencia (1997) reminds us that deficit thinking can take on different forms to conform to what is politically acceptable at the moment and continues to be used in determining teaching practices. Remaining optimistic about the abilities of their students seems to be an avenue that Maria, Sandra, and Riley believe will assist in guiding school, community, and society as a whole from viewing their students with a deficit perspective.

Some scholars would have us believe that educability is largely dependent on individual intellectual ability and that social, political, and economic conditions within the school and society are largely unrelated to why some of our children are so much more educable than others. (Hawkins, 1984, p. 375)

This supports the participants’ beliefs that students with intellectual disabilities need to be acknowledged by the community and society in general.

Learning is the gate to knowledge. Knowledge has been defined as a familiarity with someone or something, which can include information, facts, descriptions, or skills acquired through experience or education (Wikipedia, 2012). Freire (1970) posits that knowledge is socially constructed. It is not something that exists outside of language and the social subjects who use it. He also suggests teaching cannot be a process of transference of knowledge from the one teaching to the learner. Learning is a process where knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion, and reflection (p.22).
Maria (cancer survivor) and Sandra (nurturer) both echoed Friere’s conception of knowledge expressing their beliefs that the knowledge of most worth is the personal knowledge of oneself and one’s world that comes from one’s direct experience in the world and one’s personal response to such experience. True to the learner centered ideology, they are much less interested in knowledge than they are in student growth and learning. Schiro (2008) asserts that knowledge enters the scene because it is an inevitable by-product of learning, and thus of growth. It results from individuals making meaning out of their experiences (p.108). It appears that Maria and Sandra do not consider themselves givers of knowledge, but rather givers of experiences out of which their students create knowledge for themselves. In our discussion about what was believed to be the most important thing about knowledge, where we get it or how we use it, Sandra was very quick to respond “both.” She expressed that how we use knowledge is very important, but more important is where we get the knowledge:

It’s important because we can get some knowledge from someone that is not saying good things or is exhibiting behaviors that you would not want children to imitate. Like when I was younger and you have a basket. You go through life with a basket and put different things from different places in the basket. But you’re going to get some bad stuff in the basket sometimes.

In this excerpt, Sandra believes that the knowledge individuals possess is a personal creation unique to each of them, reflecting a learner centered ideology. Schiro (2008) contends that an important assumption drawn from this belief is that knowledge, which is the result of learning, is something personal that “results from” an individual’s
“particular interactions” with his environment that “he and he alone has experienced (p. 108).” Maria concurs, stating, “We all have different experiences in our life, and we all have people around us that are truly knowledgeable; not just book smart but life smart.”

All students possess multiple frames of reference with which to construct knowledge by virtue of their race, gender, ethnic background, ability, and physical appearance (Ellsworth, 1989). According to O’Loughlin (1992), the potential for knowledge construction depends on how schools react to students’ attempts to employ these diverse frameworks for making meaning. School (and society) can validate or marginalize any or all of students’ ways of knowing (p. 337).

Riley (musician turned teacher) contends that how we use knowledge is the most important attribute about knowledge, explaining, “You can have all of the knowledge in the world but it means nothing if you can’t use it.” Riley believes that knowledge gives individuals the ability to do things. Schiro (2008) maintains that educators whose beliefs are congruent with the social efficiency ideology, except that knowledge derives its authority from the impact it has in perpetuating society by providing individuals with the skills that they need to function within society (p.177).

Freire (1970) asserts that learning, which he defines as obtaining knowledge and making meaning, is an active process, and that students learn by doing rather than by passively absorbing information. Riley and Maria both agree that learning best occurs when a student confronts a real social crisis and participates in the construction of a solution to that crisis. Alignment with the social reconstruction ideology is supported by their responses related to whether learning opportunities are structured by good teachers or happen by chance. Riley, Sandra, and Maria all believe that both opportunities are
necessary. Maria affirms that “there has to be some guidance on behalf of the teacher that sets up good learning opportunities, but there’s nothing quite like those teachable moments.” Riley concurs with Maria stating, “Both of course, some are intentional and designed by the teacher, but also the ones that happen by chance are priceless, and we need to take advantage of all of those.”

Social reconstruction-driven educators believe that learning is not a passive process of incorporating objective reality into the mind by simple absorption. Instead they believe that learning is a process of actively assimilating and accommodating experience in such a way that it makes sense to the learner (Schiro, 1980). It appears that Maria, Riley, and Sandra believe that learning takes place in both classrooms and community. Their responses to the components surrounding knowledge and learning lead us to believe that, as teachers, they try to keep learning as close to firsthand experience as possible, making clear that learning requires interaction of learners and the environment outside themselves. The teachings of Freire (1970) support this contention, reminding us that educators make it possible for students to become themselves by providing opportunities for extension of knowledge using experiences and creative thinking.

Capturing student growth. The emphasis of IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002) on achievement outcomes has resulted in schools and districts increasing their efforts to connect curriculum and assessments more intentionally with improved outcomes. Lipsky and Gartner (1989) assert that research and development have pointed to the need for assessment procedures that produce holistic profiles of learning, instruction, and curriculum for individual students. Students with intellectual disabilities currently are required to participate in statewide and district wide assessments. Although most students
with intellectual disabilities are able to participate when given appropriate accommodations, a small percentage of students are typically working on a more basic, functional curriculum and do not meet the same requirements as those students graduating with a standard diploma (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). In the state of Georgia, these students are assessed using the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA), a portfolio assessment of selected grade level standards in the curriculum areas of math, science, social studies, and language arts. Portfolio assessments typically contain the observable evidence or products of performance such as work samples, permanent products, observations, or captioned photographs. In a discussion GAA, Riley (musician turned teacher) claims:

The advantage of GAA is that it pushes teachers to provide activities based on the general education curriculum. The disadvantage is that it does not assess the student but is more of a teacher assessment; it is all about how it is written up. I am currently attending a second training because I have had a failing student for two years I a row. I did the same activity the second year that I did the year before (which passed) and that activity failed the second year. It is very frustrating, enough to make me think of doing something else in life. I know teachers that don’t teach all day and let the students play on the computers that pass GAA because they can write it up well. I spend all day teaching and working with the students and have a student fail GAA because of the way it is written.

Maria (cancer survivor) expresses similar beliefs about GAA stating:
The advantages would definitely be accountability, making sure teachers actually do something with their students. It’s definitely forcing teachers to provide access to the curriculum, which is definitely a benefit. The disadvantage is the way it is set up. It seems like in so many ways to be more like a teacher evaluation. I remember in one of the GAA meetings, my first year doing it, they were saying, “Remember if you’re doing caption photos, each child should never wear the same outfit the day they did the first one.” It’s like the way it has turned out is so time consuming. I feel like it is a waste of my time. I am focusing on things that I really shouldn’t be using my time on.

Sandra (nurturer) conveys beliefs about GAA that coincide with Riley’s and Maria’s, contending:

Well the advantage is, to my students, and to myself, to get to work and to get to know general ed teachers and the kids. Some of those regular kids, they just love me, and I just love them. And I’ve gotten to know, it’s helped me to get to know, not all of the teachers, but I started with kindergarten, then first grade, then second grade, and I’ve gotten all the way up to sixth grade now, and some teachers are new, but I know everybody now. The disadvantage is that it takes a good bit of time away from the classroom for more appropriate and important things. Like academics they should be working on…and the disadvantage for me is that it’s a lot of extra work outside of school hours and we don’t get paid any more for that. I mean, I’m not griping about my pay, but when I keep
track of how much extra time I put in, that’s ridiculous. I remember one year it was 87 hours. I remembered to write it down.

Maria, Sandra, and Riley all view GAA as a connection to general education, either through the curriculum and/or with the teachers and students in the general education environment. They also believe that it holds the teachers of students with intellectual disabilities accountable for exposing their students to the general education curriculum standards. It appears that these advantages are overshadowed by the realism that the GAA process is extremely time consuming. All three teachers strongly conveyed that the scoring of the assessment was subjective due to the nature of the scoring process, making the results inconsistent among students. Maria and Riley both agree with providing their students opportunities to access the general education curriculum, but it seems that Sandra believes that there are other objectives that the students need to be working on that are more critical to their needs.

In response to the ideology survey, Maria and Riley both believe that evaluation should be a subjective comparison of the evaluatee’s performance with his capabilities; it is both to indicate to others and the evaluatee the extent to which he is living up to his capabilities. Within this social reconstruction ideology, educators postulate that what students learn is thought to be testable only in their everyday life outside of school as they work to reconstruct themselves and society in light of the curriculum’s vision of the future good society (Schiro, 2008). Educators aligned with the social reconstruction ideology believe that the purpose of student evaluation is to measure student progress with respect to ability and allow students to demonstrate their values to others.
Sandra’s beliefs about evaluation reside within the learner centered ideology. The learner centered educator views the purpose of evaluation to be diagnosing student abilities to facilitate growth and to reflect to evaluatees their progress (Schiro, 2008, p.188). Sandra believes that evaluation should be useful in stimulating the evaluatee’s learning in a non-evaluative manner, as it is primarily for the benefit of the evaluatee. This appears to be consistent with her beliefs related to GAA, maintaining that an advantage to this assessment process was working with the general education teachers and students. It appears that Sandra feels it is important for her students to have opportunities to interact in the general education environment and that these opportunities enhance student learning.

Both of the ideologies represented by the responses of the teachers present similar views regarding evaluation. Within the learner centered and social reconstruction ideologies, it is believed that students should be evaluated during, instead of after, instruction. Both ideologies reflect the view that evaluation should be holistic, which supports Lipsky and Gartner’s (1989) claims of the need for assessments that produce holistic profiles of learning, curricular and instructional for individual students (p. 127). Finally, both ideologies view designing assessment as separate from curriculum development. This comparison of ideologies brings forward several areas of similar views and raises the question: does the Georgia Alternate Assessment reflect the beliefs of Maria, Sandra, and Riley? Based on our discussions of GAA and their ideological preferences, it appears that parts of the GAA process conflict with their ideological views regarding evaluation.


**Curriculum and its Purpose**

Students with intellectual disabilities span a very wide range of abilities. The continuum ranges from students who will require assistance with all areas of self-care throughout their lives to students for whom the acquisition of academic skills and concepts is a reasonable and appropriate goal. The curriculum designed by the teacher may include areas such as functional academic skills (reading and mathematics skills that are used frequently in everyday life such as reading signs or instructions, counting change, or taking measurements), communication skills, physical development and personal care, social interaction skills, community living skills, career development/work experience, and transition planning.

As part of the interview process the teachers were asked, “What does curriculum mean to you?” Sandra (nurturer) stated that curriculum is all individual and mostly focuses on communication skills, daily living skills, and social skills. She began to describe how the activities are embedded within these domains:

Our meals would be under skill building and daily living, and then if I were to take some students to the lunch room to be with general ed, then that blends in with the social and the communication. They all kind of go hand in hand. I think I am a little slack sometimes because they will reach for what they want. I would use more pictures or communication devices if they needed it.

This excerpt clearly reveals Sandra’s emphasis on curriculum that would assist students with intellectual disabilities in functioning as independent as possible in the community. The collage that Sandra completed when she was asked to visually represent curriculum
in her classroom was titled “Preparing our Children with the Skills They Need for the Future.” The message in her collage is consistent with what she avers. Sandra reports, “I visually represented the academic curriculum for the students in my classroom by placing a communication device in the center of my collage as communication is the key for special needs students.” She used pictures made with Boardmaker Picture Communication Software to represent additional curriculum activities in the classroom, which include eating, drinking, dressing, using nice manners, cooking activities, and performing computer activities. Sandra did not make any mention of activities in the curriculum areas of math, science, reading, or social studies. She stated that she does complete these activities through GAA but feels that they do not help prepare the students for the future. According to Browder et al. (2007), teaching academic content does not mean abandoning students’ needs for functional skills instruction, but it does mean finding a way to teach academic content to all students with significant intellectual disabilities since, by federal mandate, all students must be assessed in the academic areas.

During the face-to-face interview, Riley’s (musician turned teacher) response to the meaning of curriculum was similar to Sandra’s, with the addition of functional academics.

I think that, to me, it would mean the academic portion that I do, the reading and math, whether it be functional…typically it would be all functional like reading stories and things like that, but then also I see it as bringing in those types of things like dressing skills, feeding skills, bathroom skills, all those types of things, because they need those just as much as they need to read.
Riley like Sandra, expressed the importance of communication in her classroom. She stressed the importance of the students being able to communicate their wants and needs as part of the curriculum. Riley included four words on her collage that represent curriculum: flexible, individualized, inventive, and collaborate. These words hint to the fact that they represent descriptions of herself, as the teacher, when developing curriculum. The remaining pictures representing curriculum on the collage included a variety of reading, math, and computer programs which that are utilized in the classroom, as well as social skills and cooking programs. The collage depicts the importance of functional academics in the classroom.

Maria (cancer survivor) expressed the same passion for functional academics. Describing the meaning of curriculum she offered:

Well, with my kids a lot of it has to do with exposure. Exposure to the standards and I’m not able to expose them to all of the standards on their grade level especially as they get older because it’s so high and so over their heads. In kindergarten some of the stuff, like talking about sounds and exposure to literature and reading books, that’s a little more appropriate. So I hate to say I use kindergarten as a guideline but in a way I kind of do. A lot of it is exposing them to prints; reading stories and asking, what is this story about? And a lot of them need help with that. So I have to say a lot of them…my fifth graders get exposed to the fifth grade curriculum more so when I’m doing GAA activities because it’s required. Because the fact of the matter is, talking about the big picture here; them
being able to identify parts of an animal cell is not really something that’s
going to benefit them.

Maria’s collage reflected the importance of academics as curriculum in her classroom. She emphasized the use of hands-on multisensory activities and high interest materials. She displayed pictures representing students celebrating success, indicating that she focuses on developing curriculum activities with each student’s strengths and abilities in mind. It appears that the determination she described in herself while overcoming her illness is also exhibited in her willingness to provide opportunities for success for her students.

The teachers created a second collage, and the prompt presented to them was to represent the curriculum in their classroom if they had unlimited resources. Maria addressed more of classroom environment needs that if acquired would increase curriculum objectives covered. The needs included a larger classroom to set up work stations, additional help in the classroom, and having a classroom that addresses all of the students’ personal needs, such as a restroom. Maria confirmed that these things are indirectly related to curriculum and would make a difference. The one request that was directly related to instruction was the implementation of Community Based Instruction (CBI), trips in the community that provide opportunity for the students with intellectual disabilities to generalize skills learned in the classroom. Maria stated that the program was cut due to budget, but this was the only opportunity for students to generalize the skills they had learned. She expressed concern that practice in the community is crucial for the student’s success.
Riley and Sandra concurred with Maria that the CBI trips were essential. Riley posited “That was our biggest activity was the exchanging of money. We always did several shopping trips a year, so that the students could generalize their skills. Plus they were communicating and all these types of things.” It appears that all three teachers feel that the CBI trips are a crucial part of the curriculum for their students.

In addition to sensory and technology equipment, Riley argued that if there were unlimited resources, the most important addition to the classroom would be a curriculum. She stated that there needed to be a curriculum for the teachers to follow, with standards for the students: “That’s why every class is so different because you do whatever you want to do, basically.” There currently is no curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities in the county. Along with the IEP goals and objectives, the teacher has to develop all additional curriculums for each student. Cochran-Smith (2004) contends that curriculum and instruction are neither neutral nor obvious. There are often contested views about what and whose knowledge is most valuable, making it difficult for the teacher to develop a curriculum for each student. Students with intellectual disabilities are frequently held to low expectations based on stereotypes and biases, are still highly likely to be educated in segregated settings, and often have access only to alternative curricular options whose quality and appropriateness vary a great deal (Wehmeyer, Sands, et al., 2002).

Maria’s and Riley’s responses clearly show their attempts to provide learning opportunities focused on functional curriculum activities. It seems that the use of the general education curriculum standards is minimal and is most visible during GAA collection periods throughout the school year. There is minimal research to support the
curriculum needs of students with intellectual disabilities, though Browder et al. (2003) (as cited by Browder et al., 2007, p.3) asserts that educators have historically increased their expectations for what can be achieved by students with significant cognitive disabilities. In the 1980s, educators proposed that students with significant cognitive disabilities could acquire skills and opportunities preparing them for life in the community. While only a small percentage of students with significant cognitive disabilities have achieved the ideal of having their own home or a competitive job in the community, many more individuals have increased community access (Browder et al., 2007, p. 3). The most recent expectation is that these individuals can learn academic content that is related to grade level standards and that this opportunity is beneficial to their lives. While not all may become literate in this content, it is feasible that more can gain some degree of academic competence with focused instruction in this area (Browder et al., 2007). Wehmeyer et al. (2003) contends that there has been too little consideration of how students with intellectual disabilities can achieve access to and make progress in the general curriculum, and many educators believe that such efforts are not relevant to this population.

When asked what kind of curriculum worker they saw themselves as – working with others to develop curriculum or their intentions guiding the development of their curriculum – Maria, Riley, and Sandra all responded that their intentions behind teaching guide their development of curriculum. Maria suggests:

At first I would try to get with colleagues to try to develop it because I needed the feel…so I needed some guidance, but now I develop it all on my own. I have on occasion, like I did for a GAA activity for fifth grade, I
did teach analyzing a chart, and so that was something I got from a fifth grade teacher. I went up to her classroom and said do you want to take a survey and said this is what I want the kids to do. So she said, “Oh sure that would be great!” She’s great, she loves having the kids exposed to my students, and I of course love having my students exposed to them.

Riley reveals her efforts to go to other teachers for curriculum:

Like in working together, I don’t work so much with the regular ed teachers as much as I should, and I know that’s a GAA, like I have talked to a few this year when I got stuck on some math things, and I know I need to do a better job on that. Typically the ones that I work with are the therapists that they bring in from the classrooms or their own opinion or things that are going on…. 

Sandra’s response mirrors that of Maria and Riley:

Well, in the past, every month I was able to go visit other teachers, once a month we were allowed to visit another teacher and really look at what they are doing, it was called teacher bingo, and I would go to regular education, they never would come to my room, and two other special ed teachers would come to my room and want a copy of this or that. You said with GAA the other teachers wanted copies of your activities. They don’t want to make the activities, but they don’t want to share theirs.

It is clear that all three teachers have collaborated with the general education teachers for activity ideas to implement the standards for GAA. Outside of this assessment requirement, it appears collaboration with other teachers is minimal. This
implies that they develop the curriculum for their classrooms based on their intentions behind teaching, as well as experience and available resources. Ashton and Webb (1986), Hoy (1969), and Smylie (1989) remind us that teachers continue to solve problems in their classrooms largely by relying on their own beliefs and experiences.

**Summary**

This chapter engaged the past experiences, curriculum ideologies, and personalities of three teachers within self-contained elementary classrooms to answer the first major research question of this study:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

The findings suggest that teachers’ beliefs reflect the academic curriculum they provide for their students. Although they are from very different backgrounds, the teachers shared the same enthusiasm for teaching their students to become as independent as possible and productive members of society. Maria and Riley maintained focus on functional academics, which included reading and mathematics. In contrast, Sandra felt that those academic areas would not benefit her students as much as the daily living and social skills. Without a curriculum to follow, the teachers were left to develop curriculum activities based on their own experiences and beliefs.

It was clear that using the general education standards to develop the activities and experiences for the students was minimal. Actually, it appears the only time this occurred was during the GAA process, which is mandated by law. Riley stated that she knew she needs to do more collaboration with the general education teachers. Maria
concurs but feels that she does not have the time due to all of the needs of the students. She also claimed that it became more difficult to incorporate grade level standards as the students got older. Sandra is adamant that daily living and social skills are the most important curriculum for her students. It seems that the three teachers are in an environment of isolation that enhances their beliefs and assumptions about their students, leading them to develop curriculum based on isolated practices. Teachers are held accountable for instruction based on the student’s IEP and general education standards during alternate assessment. For accountability purposes, the student must show progress on general education standards. If the teaching instruction is such that this can be accomplished during alternate assessment, then why does access to the general education curriculum have to diminish during all other instructional times?

There needs to be a change in expectations for students with intellectual disabilities in order for instruction to be based on general education curriculum standards, for ethical and moral, as well as for academic reasons. Instead of expecting students to achieve minimum competencies, the standards movement is about setting high expectations for all students (Landau, Vohs, & Romano, 2009). Landau et al. (2009) assert that, for the most part, students with intellectual disabilities have not been considered in the development of high, challenging, world-class standards. Because special education has developed as a separate system, removed from general education, many of the groups that are setting standards consider students with disabilities to be the “special interest group” with little relevance to mainstream education (Landau et al., 2009, p. 6). Educators’ moral imperative is to ensure that learning expectations are uniformly as high for students with intellectual disabilities as for other students. It is
important that they address this because of the significant cumulative effect that expectations have on students during their educational careers and ultimately during their lives.

In chapter five, A Culture of Isolation, I will delve into the characteristics of a typical curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities, reflecting on observations conducted during data collection and discussing what the teachers have in common regarding what they teach and how they teach. Expectations of their students and learning opportunities will also be examined. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, I would argue that teacher expectations have a direct effect on the learning opportunities provided to students with disabilities, which is consistent with the research literature reviewed in this study.
CHAPTER FIVE: A CULTURE OF ISOLATION

Schools use different approaches to providing special education services to identified students. The educational setting opportunities lie on a continuum from full inclusion, where students with disabilities spend all, or at least more than half, of the school day with students who do not have special educational needs, to a segregated classroom where students spend no time in classes with non-disabled peers. Segregated students may attend the same school where regular classes are provided, but they spend all instructional time exclusively in a separate classroom, often referred to as self-contained, for students with special needs. If their special class is located in an ordinary school, they may be provided opportunities for social integration outside the classroom; for example, they may eat meals with non-disabled students (Warnock Report, 1978). Because inclusion can require substantial modification of the general curriculum, most schools use it only for selected students with mild to moderate special needs, which is accepted as a best practice (Smith, 2007). It is the role of the teacher, along with the educational staff within the school, to ensure that each student with disabilities is provided an education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Friend and Bursuck (2006) report that LRE is the student’s right to be educated in the setting most like the educational setting for peers without disabilities in which the student can be successful, with appropriate supports provided (p. 3). The classrooms of Maria, Riley, and Sandra are all referred to as self-contained classrooms, and the opportunities for access to the general education setting and curriculum are quite varied and appear to be minimal.
In chapter four, the biographical profiles and ideological perspectives of Maria, Sandra, and Riley were revealed and compared in order to acquire a better understanding of the participants’ perspectives in relation to the purpose of school, teaching, learning, the knowledge of most worth, and evaluation, as well as their views of the meaning of curriculum and the purpose curriculum serves. In this chapter, a typical curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities will be explored, including teacher expectations of the students and learning opportunities provided inside and outside the self-contained classroom. Chapter five captures the perspectives of the participants through words and observation, as they grapple with the challenges of the curriculum, as well as the school facility and staff, in providing students with intellectual disabilities equitable learning opportunities, and is guided by the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?
R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Depicting a Typical Curriculum**

Instruction has always involved deciding on what to teach (curriculum) and how to teach it (methods, materials, and activities). According to Clark (1994), special education from its earliest years was left to develop its own discipline around both of these areas. Functional outcome of education, that is, the ability to live and work as part of the community, may or may not result from traditional educational curricula. It is difficult for parents and educators to deal with this fact. The idea of providing a more functional curriculum for more functional outcomes seems to preclude inclusion, especially given today’s increased emphasis on academics in public education (Clark, 1994). The 1997 amendments to IDEA included language requiring IEP of any student receiving special education services to describe how the student would be involved with and progress in the general curriculum. The 2004 IDEA amendments maintained and extended these access to the general education curriculum mandates. In general, IDEA requires that the IEPs of all students receiving special education services – including students with severe disabilities – identify specific accommodations and curriculum modifications to ensure student involvement with and progress in the general education curriculum (Soukup et al., 2007).

Reflecting on what curriculum means to them, Maria, Sandra, and Riley reveal their view of curriculum in terms of their own classroom and students. Maria (cancer survivor) describes curriculum as exposure to the standards, stating:
Well, with my kids a lot of it has to do with exposure. Exposure to the curriculum standards, and I’m not able to expose them to all of the standards on their grade level especially as they get older because it’s so high and so over their heads. In kindergarten some of the stuff, like talking about sounds and exposure to literature and reading books, that’s a little more appropriate. So I hate to say I use kindergarten as a guideline but in a way I kind of do. A lot of it is exposing them to prints; reading stories and asking, what is this story about? And a lot of them need help with that. So I have to say a lot of them... my fifth graders get exposed to the fifth grade curriculum more so when I’m doing GAA activities because it’s required. Because the fact of the matter is, talking about the big picture here; them being able to identify parts of an animal cell is not really something that’s going to benefit them.

She continued to explain what curriculum looks like in her classroom:

Every day we have morning meetings, and we talk about the weather and the day. Like what day of school is it; you know, today was the eighth day of school. And I have my little straws that we wrap in rubber bands, and so my students that are visually impaired, so when I have them, I have them touching them against their skin so like, this is what one feels like, this is what ten feels like. And I do it every single day so that they know. So when we talk about the weather, is it warm, are we wearing long sleeves today, and are we wearing short sleeves today?
In this excerpt, Maria affirms that her instruction does include the use of curriculum-based standards, although off grade level for most of her students. During all three observation sessions with Maria, it was clear that she includes academic instruction in her activities. Morning circle focused on mathematics and reading skills, science involved students’ participation in an experiment, and the cooking opportunities focused on following step-by-step directions with embedded opportunities to enhance communication skills using voice output devices. Subject area academics were also evident in the classroom environment, with the walls and bulletin boards showcasing letters, shapes, and numbers visible for the students. The key term Maria used in her description of curriculum was *exposure*. It is evident that Maria feels strongly about exposing her students to as much of the curriculum as possible and affirms this belief in her everyday teaching.

Riley (musician turned teacher) explains curriculum as a combination of functional curriculum and daily living skills:

I think that, to me, it would mean; the academic portion that I do, the reading and math, whether it be functional…typically it would be all functional like reading stories and things like that, but then also I see it as bringing in those types of things like dressing skills, feeding skills, bathroom skills, all those types of things because they need those just as much as they need to read. If they can’t do those things, then they miss the point because you need to be able to do that. So I see it as a blend.

She painted a picture of curriculum in her classroom as follows:
We do the Ed-Mark reading, we do the functional signs, things like that. The math types of things we work on would be adding and subtracting you know, but also we work on money and time and those types of things. And you know, dressing, we work on a lot of skills, like if somebody wanted to have you put their coat on or take their coat off, packing and unpacking, general types of things like that. Communication is a huge part of our curriculum; throughout the day we’re trying to get them to initiate things, get them to tell us what they need rather than us saying, “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” Tell me when you need to go. For Georgia Alternate Assessment we’re doing science and social studies standards. Like right now we’re working on the solar system stories, which are covering reading portions with the stories, but it’s also for science. So we’ll answer questions for the reading portion and then you know other types of things…. And then the grade level reading and math…just trying to modify it down to things that they can do that are meaningful to them.

The observations conducted in Riley’s classroom confirmed the belief that her students need academics, but they need to be functional in order for them to be contributing members of society. The academic subject-based activities that were observed during visits to Riley’s classroom included letter recognition, sight-word based computer reading program, time, money, and matching pictures to words. Similar to Maria’s classroom, the content of the curriculum in Riley’s classroom was standards-based, although below the grade level of the individual students. Both participants revealed that grade level standards for their students are addressed through the GAA
process for the majority of their instruction. Both teachers’ curricular and instructional
decision making seem to mirror their beliefs that the grade level standards for their
students will not benefit their long term goal of helping the students become as
independent as possible in the community.

Sandra (nurturer) views curriculum as being all individual, stating that it mostly
focuses on communication, daily living, and social skills. She gave the example:

Our meals would be under skill building and daily living, and then if I
were to take some students to the lunch room to be with general ed, then
that blends in with the social and the communication. They all kind of go
hand in hand. I think I am a little slack sometimes because they will reach
for what they want. I would use more pictures or a communication device
if they needed it.

Sandra’s classroom environment reflected an ambiance that directly correlated
with her perspectives about curriculum. Most of the resources and activities that were
visible reflected sensorimotor and communication skills. There was evidence of a variety
of voice output devices for students to use as a means to communicate during activities.
Also evident were various sensorimotor activities, as well as, equipment used for
providing students supported seating and positioning in order to obtain optimal function.

Observations in Sandra’s classroom reflected the importance of social skills and
daily living skills. A substantial amount of time was spent during breakfast working on
skills such as sitting at the table, students feeding themselves, student preparation of their
own drinks, and students cleaning their areas of the table. Although there was evidence of
the use of communication devices during classroom activities, these devices were not available during breakfast for the students to verbalize their wants and needs.

There were some academic subject-based decorations on the wall in Sandra’s classroom, mainly permanent products completed during the GAA process. During one observation, Sandra had the students complete a Fall book, emphasizing their use of the communication device to respond to simple questions from a choice of two. It was clear that Sandra includes these types of activities in her classroom instruction, with the major focus being communication and social skills rather than academic content.

Both Riley and Sandra view an important part of curriculum as those skills that individuals need to function as independently as possible in society. One difference in their views was noticeable: Riley included the academic subject areas of reading and mathematics on a functional level in both individual and group activities which was evident during the observations, while Sandra embedded the subject area of reading into an activity that focused on communication skills. Conversely, Maria ties curriculum to the academic curriculum standards, with no mention of the living and social skills that Riley and Sandra deem important. During face-to-face interviews, when asked what subjects they teach, all three teachers reported that they teach reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. They made it clear that the reading and math were on a functional level and the science and social studies were more standards-based (academic) completed through GAA. According to Polloway, Patton, Epstein, and Smith (1989), a functional curriculum must have a specific context and focus for students with disabilities. The context and focus arise from the need of all persons with disabilities to have the life skills necessary to make a successful transition from school to adult living.
During face-to-face interviews, discussion took place about the relevance of the general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. Riley (musician turned teacher) expressed her thoughts as follows:

A lot of the curriculum is not relevant, such as I don’t think that knowing the settlements of Georgia will apply to what the student needs to know to function in society, but it could be of interest and be very important as a leisure skill or hobby.

Sandra (nurturer) revealed that the general education curriculum is not important for her students and stated:

Well, with my students, number recognition and word recognition is not as important to them. Then I think; how do you know what they do know? I don’t know the general education curriculum very well except for math, but I don’t have any students that are that high [functioning]. It is not important in their world, not as important as brushing their hair and holding that brush.

Maria (cancer survivor) conveyed her perspectives about the relevance of the general education curriculum for her students with intellectual disabilities, stating:

Relevant? …yes and no. The way it is in its entirety and putting the entire thing [curriculum] to my students, no, but parts of it definitely are relevant in adapting it. In fifth grade, I’m doing locate geographical features like the Mohave Desert. So with that, that’s getting the student exposed to maps. And so, does he/she really understand what a map is and what it represents? Probably not, but it’s still exposing him/her to things…. I
mean without the GAA, how many teachers would really expose the
students to a map of the United States. It’s like you get one idea and
then…or you do one thing and it’s like the kids pick up on it and you go,
wow…. Pieces of the general education curriculum that would be relevant
include a lot of the reading standards and exposure to written literature,
like reading to the kids and having an appreciation for different types of
literature. That is definitely very relevant. And I feel like everyone should
have a love for reading. Some of the math skills like the fundamentals of
time scheduling, what comes first, what comes last? That’s very, very
relevant to them. You know, you can’t have this until you have this…so
like cause and effect and order of things.

These excerpts reveal the participants’ perspectives about the relevance of general
education curriculum for their students with intellectual disabilities. Sandra’s beliefs are
clear: skills such as communication, social, and daily living, versus subject-area
knowledge, would benefit her students and assist in them becoming independent
participants in society. Maria and Riley believe there is some relevance to the general
education curriculum and view it as an avenue to obtaining a leisure activity or hobby. It
seems that they consider off grade-level curriculum as relevant for their students because
the content contains those skills and concepts that students might need to function in
society, skills such as telling time and money recognition. Agran et al. (2002) suggest
that the concept of access to the general education curriculum is often not well
understood, and few school districts have clear policies regarding how to promote such
access. As a result, practitioners often interpret promoting access to the general education
curriculum to mean different things. Frequently it is interpreted simply as synonymous with student placement in the general education classroom. According to Soupikup et al. (2007), the primary focus of the IDEA mandates to ensure student involvement with and progress in the general education curriculum is, however, on what students are taught, how curriculum content is delivered, and what supports are provided to ensure student progress in the general education curriculum, with progress essentially defined by content and student performance standards in each state (p. 102). This is noted not to negate the importance of inclusive practices for students with disabilities, but instead to observe that a focus on student access to the general education curriculum should, in fact, move the inclusion discussion from being primarily about where students are educated and how to support students in that environment to a discussion about what is taught, how curriculum content is delivered, and what supports are needed to ensure progress in the general education curriculum (Soupikup et al., 2007, p. 102).

The participants describe how they obtain their curricular and instructional ideas and activities. Maria (cancer survivor) stated that she tries to use anything seasonal that is inspirational. She also obtains curriculum from an adapted newspaper (News 2 You), books from the library, and her own imagination. Riley (musician turned teacher) revealed:

Addressing the students’ goals and objectives in the Individualized Education Program are a given but I think I look at more…. I am always making little notes. If they can’t do something, like read two-digit numbers, whether it is a goal or not, I see that it is something that we need to work on. I am looking at standards a lot more now than I used to
because Georgia Alternate Assessment has really opened my eyes. So I’m looking at that a whole lot more but still a lot of the curriculum comes from things that I have used before, you know, things that I know or ideas from other teachers.

Sandra (nurturer) stated that about eighteen years ago the teachers of students with intellectual disabilities had a set of curriculum books called the Syracuse Curriculum, which contained a volume on communication, one on daily living, and other functional domain areas. She stated that now a lot of the curriculum is comprised of the student’s goals and objectives. Sandra reported that she obtains ideas from different places, such as professional development meetings, and then she makes up the activities for the curriculum.

According to the participants’ responses, it is clear that there is not a set curriculum for students with significant intellectual disabilities, and the implementation of curriculum standards exercised with the general education population of students is minimal. Actually, the teacher responses indicate that the general education curriculum standards for each student’s grade level are used mainly in correlation with the GAA process. Maria and Riley revealed that their students were provided opportunities to access the curriculum standards; however, the standards were not on the student’s grade levels. Based on this disproportionate access to the general education curriculum and the reality that teachers of students with significant intellectual disabilities are left to their own experiences, beliefs, and expectations to develop curriculum, it appears that students in this investigation experience inequities in educational opportunities. Corrections of
these inequities are required before we are able to form a more just and equitable society by seeking to provide what is best for all students (De Valenzuela et al., 2006, p. 439).

In a study conducted in 2002, Agran et al. (as cited in Wehmeyer et al., 2003) asked teachers questions about their perception of access to general education curriculum for their students with severe disabilities. When asked if ensuring students’ access to the general curriculum would help increase educational expectations for students with severe disabilities, 68% either agreed or strongly agreed. When asked, however, if students with severe disabilities should be held accountable to the same performance standards as students without disabilities, 93% of the 60 teachers in this study indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed (Agran et al., 2002, as cited in Wehmeyer et al., 2003). In other words, teachers agreed that having access to general education curriculum would increase expectations, but did not think students should be held accountable to the general curriculum (p. 263). According to Browder et al. (2007), teaching academic content does not mean abandoning students’ needs for functional skills instruction, but it does mean finding a way to teach academic content to all students with significant cognitive disabilities since, by federal mandate, all students must be assessed in the academic areas. Creating full educational opportunity means making curricular and instructional decisions that foster learning opportunities in non-mandated content along with content using standards-based (academic) curriculum.

The Match that Lights the Candle of Achievement

Teachers' expectations for students – whether high or low – can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, students tend to give to teachers as much or as little as teachers expect of them. When asked what curriculum expectations she had for her
students, Maria responded with the single word “participation.” She continued to explain that her students could not read, but she just wanted them to pay attention, using eye contact or looking in the direction of the book when she is reading to them. Evidenced during an observation, Maria also expects her students to participate in each activity until completion so that they are exposed to a variety of curricula. During a science experiment, one of Maria’s students began walking away, and Maria would consistently bring him back to the activity in order to have the student complete the task. Friend and Bursuck (2006) assert that even when students with significant intellectual disabilities cannot learn exactly the same curriculum as other students, they benefit from partial participation, that is, learning appropriate skills that are based on the general education curriculum. Examples include pouring during a science experiment, choosing between two or three items during a consumer science course, and recognizing one name during reading (p. 195).

Riley described the expectations she holds for her students as follows:

The expectations I have… I think differ for each child because I know each child’s strengths and weaknesses and I see what they can do and what they’re holding back on. So it’s very individualized and therefore different…. Sometimes I say to myself, okay, really we’re not going to be able to do this, and so by golly I’m going to modify this so that every student can get it in the same time. I would like for each one of them to be as independent as possible, and that’s why I push them so hard.

In this excerpt, it seems that Riley remains aware of where her students are functioning with the skills being taught. She speaks of modifying activities that are
difficult for the students to attain, allowing them opportunities for success. As revealed previously, Riley views curriculum as functional academics, social skills, and daily living skills, and it appears that she holds high expectations for her students within these curricular areas. Therefore, what keeps Riley from holding those same high expectations for her students when provided curriculum guided by grade level general education standards? Teacher expectations guide curricular and instructional decision-making, which influences the type of learning opportunities a teacher provides for students. Bamburg (1994) proposes, “While it would be misleading and inaccurate to state that teacher expectations determine a student’s success, the research clearly establishes that teacher expectations do play a significant role in determining how well and how much students learn (p. 6).

Sandra conveys her curriculum expectations stating:

I think they should be potty trained and try to be as independent as possible, I think it’s important for them to be able to control their emotions, be able to communicate when they need to go to the bathroom and be able to use their utensils for eating. It is extremely important for them to communicate what they feel! Sandra describes her expectations with emphasis on social and daily living skills, making no mention of standards-based (academic) curriculum. The students in her classroom have eligibilities under the category of severe or profound intellectual disabilities, but Sandra contends that one of her students is much higher functioning than the rest of the class. As evidenced in an observation, Sandra’s expectations for this student were clearly higher than her expectations for the other students in the class. The curricular and
instructional decisions that she made for this student included more academic based activities, although significantly off grade level, such as using worksheets with opportunities for writing by circling his/her answer and tracing his/her name. According to McGrew and Evans (2004), it is important that students with disabilities not be saddled with group-based, stereotyped low academic expectations. Just as the diversity of learning rates for students without disabilities is acknowledged, so it should be for students with disabilities.

Sandra’s overall expectations for the students in her class do not include standards-based (academic) curriculum. Many educators working with students with more severe disabilities are dubious that the focus on access to the general education curriculum is either achievable or advisable (Lee et al., 2006, p. 199). Agran et al. (2002) conducted a survey of teachers working with students with severe disabilities about their perceptions of the IDEA access requirements. When asked if ensuring students’ access to the general curriculum would help increase educational expectations for students with severe disabilities, 75% of teachers agreed to some degree. However, 63% indicated they felt access to the general education curriculum was more important for students with mild disabilities. While between 11% and 23% of respondents indicated they used several different ways to ensure some level of access, the largest proportion (37%) indicated that students with severe disabilities were receiving an educational program developed outside the context of the general curriculum. Nearly 3/4 of respondents indicated that their students with severe disabilities were evaluated exclusively by criteria stipulated in the IEP. The majority of teachers (85%) indicated that students with severe disabilities should not be held to the same standards as students without disabilities, and over half
(53%) reported their school district had no clear plan for ensuring access to the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities (Agran et al., 2002).

Omatoni and Omatoni (1996) assert that having high expectations does not magically equalize students' innate abilities and learning rates. To accommodate differences among students and help all students achieve mastery without resorting to watering down standards and expectations, teachers can manipulate three variables: time, grouping, and methodology. According to Cotton (2001), lower educational expectations appear to be more influential for younger students and students with lower achievement. Therefore, it appears that teacher expectations for students with intellectual disabilities could influence the degree to which students are provided standards-based (academic) learning opportunities, especially at the elementary level.

Success – When Preparation Meets Opportunity

It is clear that students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities have very distinct learning needs that call for a holistic, comprehensive, and individualized education (Jones, 2010, p. 681). Many students require a multi-professional team to support their education successfully. According to Jones (2010), it is not that these intense individual needs do not exist, they most definitely do, but it is how the school responds to these needs that is the focus of current school reform attention. Educational opportunities for this group of learners have been influenced by a developmental and/or functional curriculum approach (Browder and Spooner, 2006). Jones (2010) contends that this has occurred at the expense of a broad and balanced standards-based (academic) curriculum (p. 682).
During face-to-face interviews, the participants were asked “What do you consider a learning opportunity?” Riley (musician turned teacher) responded by stating:

Any time during the day when…I don’t know how to word this…if a situation comes up that a student needs to work on something, even if you’re in the bathroom, the lunchroom, the classroom, wherever you are, if it’s something the student doesn’t know that he/she needs to know, then that’s the time to take that moment and teach it.

Maria (cancer survivor) described a learning opportunity as “everything.” She continued to state, “Everything is a learning opportunity. The other day when we were walking to the restroom, something happened and there was an opportunity for learning. I think we were walking in the halls and a teacher dropped something and I said, ‘Look!’ So we talk about it and pick it up.”

Sandra (nurturer) detailed a learning opportunity as follows:

Like a cooking activity we’re doing…or it could be sitting on the potty for an hour. The student got some yogurt covered raisins when he/she finished and he/she got a big certificate and he/she went around the school telling everybody what he/she did. He/she got all these snacks and treats from the office and other teachers.

These excerpts lend insight into the respondents’ perspectives on learning opportunities. Maria, Riley, and Sandra view learning opportunities as activities and instruction in the areas of social skills and daily living. They relate learning opportunities to the incidental situations that occur throughout the school day. The participants seem to feel these incidental situations are teachable moments. In their descriptions of learning
opportunities there was no reference to accessing standards-based (academic) curriculum activities or possibilities of instruction in some degree of inclusive setting. Feretti and Eisenman (2010) remind us that federal policies intended to promote equitable learning opportunities have mobilized efforts to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Although these efforts have been met with some success, achievement gaps remain. Feretti and Eisenman (2010) argue that local cultures of teaching practices and decision making continue to be the primary influences on learning experiences (p. 378). It appears from the responses of Maria, Sandra, and Riley that their curricular and instructional decision-making foster learning opportunities that do not access standards-based (academic) curriculum activities and instruction on the students grade level.

Expressing their perspectives about learning opportunities, the participants revealed their perspectives on fairness of offering the same learning opportunities to all students. Maria (cancer survivor) contends:

They should all have the same opportunity. It is just not always reasonable. I really want to expose the kids to general ed [activities and curriculum in an inclusive setting]. In the past two years I would get with general ed almost every single day. Like we would go up for recess…. I mean the kids are still exposed to special areas, two or three of them are, but I’ve got one with such strong behavior problems that as soon as he walks out of the classroom he gets upset. He can’t handle it, he’s on the floor screaming, and he’s disturbing the entire school or everyone in the area because you can hear him from down the hall.
Sandra (nurturer) agrees with Maria’s belief that all students should be offered the same opportunities. She asserts, “I think it is fair to offer the same learning opportunities to everyone because you never know what someone is going to pick up. I don’t know what my students are thinking.”

Riley (musician turned teacher) concurs with Maria and Riley’s belief that all students should be offered the same learning opportunities. She states:

…absolutely. I think a lot of times people give up on our kinds of kids. I mean, certainly when your I.Q is a certain level, you’re not going to be able to learn certain types of things, but does it mean that you shouldn’t have the opportunity to be exposed to it? You don’t know…honestly and you know GAA shows us that. They come up with all kinds of things and they remember things from day to day that you don’t even think they ever would have been able to do.

Sandra and Riley seem to emphasize the disbanding of deficit model education to provide all students the same learning opportunities. Trent, Artiles, and Englert (1998) assert that special education has relied too heavily on deficit thinking and must now enhance existing practices with alternate approaches that consider the contexts in which children with disabilities learn (p.227). Maria, Sandra, and Riley indirectly referred to curriculum when reflecting on learning opportunities for all students. In contrast, when revealing their perspectives on what they consider to be a learning opportunity, the responses were solely based on the students in their classrooms and emphasized social and daily living skills. Maria did make mention of the difficulty in providing learning opportunities for one of her students due to behavior issues, again accentuating the
importance of social skills. It seems even though they believe that all students, including their own, should have the same learning opportunities, the curricular and instructional decision-making of Maria, Sandra, and Riley emphasized daily living skills, social skills, and functional academics that will assist the students in becoming functional members of society. Based on the responses during the interviews, this directly correlates to the expectations that the respondents hold for the students in their classrooms. McGrew and Evans (2004) report that most researchers have concluded that the majority of educators (particularly experienced teachers and teachers who are very familiar with their students) form expectations based on initial available information such as test scores or eligibility categories and adjust their expectations and instruction based on changes in student performance (p. 20). Therefore it could be assumed that changing expectations has a direct impact on teachers’ curricular and instructional decision-making, influencing the types of learning opportunities provided to students with significant intellectual disabilities.

During the discussion of learning opportunities, Maria alluded to the fact that lack of resources was a significant factor that restricted her ability to provide frequent learning opportunities throughout the school environment. She continued to describe the wide variety of needs that her students exhibit and the tremendous amount of support that would be required for them to participate in curriculum activities outside the self-contained classroom. While recognizing the many challenges to implementing effective practices and limited resources for meeting students’ needs, Feretti and Eisenman (2010) stress that progress towards the attainment of equitable outcomes will be strained unless financial and human resources are allocated in ways that recognize the diversity and
complexity inherent in the development of all learners and the local educational institutions that serve them (p. 379).

During face-to-face interviews, the participants were asked if teachers should treat all students equally or equitably in terms of what we have them learn. For the purposes of this study, *equally* means the same and *equitably* means different to meet the student’s needs. Sandra (nurturer) contends that “students should be treated equitably because everyone learns at their own pace and has their own type of learning, such as a visual learner or an auditory learner.” She continues, “Students don’t have the same IQ’s and they don’t have the same abilities. That is even true for general education.” Riley concurs with Sandra’s belief that all students should be treated equitably. She states:

I would say equitably because everybody learns differently whether they’re general education or special education, and I wouldn’t expect all of my students to do the same activity when it’s done just one way. They all have the same opportunities, but for every student it’s going to be individualized. We should offer them the same opportunity for content but in a different way so it meets their needs to be successful.

Maria explained the difference between the terms *equally* and *equitably* from her perspective:

It’s two different things… the thing is, any teacher who understands the concept of differentiation knows that we cannot teach everybody the same. And any teacher who says, yes everybody should be taught the same way, is not a very good teacher. Because children, human beings, have different learning styles whether it’s kinesthetic, whether it’s visual, or whatever it
is. And so you can’t teach everyone the same way. But in terms of meeting their needs, yes students should be treated equitably. You have to adapt it to that child because when it comes down to it you need...like I’m very much a big picture kind of person. Like I am in my life like, okay, what is the big picture here? What is my ultimate goal? And so is what I’m doing right now going to help me reach that goal, that big picture goal. And if the answer is no, I feel that you should question whether you should be doing the activity.

Maria, Sandra, and Riley concur that all students should be treated equitably in terms of what we have them learn. They unanimously agreed that being treated equitably is represented in teaching practices of the curriculum. They concur that all students should have equal opportunity to access the content, but the instruction of the content should be presented using methods which meet the individual needs of all students. Feretti and Eisenman (2010) contend that a focus on practice – the delivery of evidence-based, quality inputs and processes – continues to be the hallmark of equity for students with disabilities. The expectation for higher student achievement encourages schools to identify practices that promote the attainment of each student’s educational goals.

IDEA encourages consideration of a student’s functional needs as well as academic goals. The quality of students’ experiences in school, such as affiliations with peers and autonomy-supportive adults and perceived support for attainment of personally identified goals, are major factors in promoting students’ school completion (Eisenman, 2007). According to Feretti and Eisenman (2010), considering evidence about what works and understanding that inputs and outcomes both matter, an equitable education
would be one that ensures that students’ IEPs address academic, career, and personal/social goals, the delivery of a comprehensive curriculum, and effective instruction and supports that prepare students to reach those goals (p. 381). In contrast, McLaughlin (2010) proposes that the stress of trying to implement standards-based (academic) IEPs and provide instruction in grade level subject matter content while addressing the unique needs of an individual student with a significant disability can quickly obscure the ultimate goals of education for all students. Darling-Hammond (2007) maintains that if academic outcomes for students, including students with disabilities, are to change, schools must assure access to high-quality teaching within the context of a rich and challenging curriculum supported by personalized schools and classes (p. 16).

Summary

This chapter examined the characteristics of a typical curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities from the perspectives of the participants in this study. The chapter also revealed what respondents had in common regarding what they teach and how they teach. Interviews exposed the participants’ perspectives regarding expectations of their students and learning opportunities provided to their students within the school environment. The curricular and instructional decision-making of Sandra, Maria, and Riley suggest that respondents focused heavily on social and daily living skills. Maria and Riley incorporated off-grade level academics in the areas of reading and math, with Sandra emphasizing communication and social skills through reading activities. They all confirmed that the majority of standards-based (academic) curriculum opportunities on
grade level occurred during the mandatory GAA process conducted throughout the school year.

The expectations of all three participants were found to have a direct relationship to their curricular and instructional decision-making, influencing the degree to which they provide equitable learning opportunities for their students. Maria, Sandra, and Riley agreed that all students should be treated equitably in terms of what we have them learn. They were clear to express that the content of the curriculum should be consistent for all students, but it needs to be differentiated in order to meet the learning needs of each student. While examining the degree to which Maria provided equitable learning opportunities, available resources was revealed as a factor that contributed to the minimal extent to which her students participate in standards-based (academic) activities in the general education setting. The expectations of Sandra and Riley reflect curricular and instructional decision-making that supports social skills, daily living skills, and functional academics, minimizing equitable learning opportunities to access standards-based (academic) curriculum. Cotton (1989) asserts that much of the literature on teacher expectations calls attention to the fact that students do in fact have different ability levels and require different instructional approaches, materials, and rates. Research does not suggest that teachers should hold the same expectations for all students, nor that they should deliver identical instruction to them all. Rather, the focus should remain on the problems created when expectations either create or sustain differences in student performance which would probably not exist if students were treated more equitably.

Chapter six presents a discussion of the findings of this study and integrates the findings with the conceptual framework. This chapter will reveal the implications for
special education, special education teachers, pre-service teachers, and society. Chapter six will conclude with limitations to the study and general recommendations for proposed future research.
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, RECOMMENDATION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapters four and five presented the findings of this study. Chapter six presents a discussion of the findings and integrates the findings with the conceptual framework. The following sections will also be included: implications and recommendations for P-12 practice, teacher preparation and society, limitations to the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

Summary

The purpose of the present study was to examine the ideological beliefs, biases, assumptions, and expectations – that is, perspectives – of special education teachers relative to their propensity for ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, as embodied by their pedagogical practice. The literature suggests that teacher beliefs, assumptions, experiences and expectations are key factors that influence teachers’ curricular and instructional decision-making. The current study examined these factors to gain a better understanding of their impact on teachers’ willingness and/or ability to provide rich, relevant, and challenging curriculum to this population.

A multiple-case approach was used in this qualitative study to explore how the perspectives of three elementary special education teachers influence the degree to which they provide equitable learning opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities. Yin (2009) reminds us that a case study is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual,
group, social, political, and related phenomenon. This study incorporated the use of in-depth biographical interviews, open-ended interviews, observations, ideology surveys, and collages as data sources to assist teachers in reflecting on their teaching perspectives and how these factors influence their curricular and instructional decision-making. The participants in this study teach students with intellectual disabilities in self-contained elementary classrooms within a public school system. This criterion was critical for the selection of the participants. Students with intellectual disabilities have historically had to fight for educational opportunities comparable to those offered to typically developing peers. Teachers of students whose educational setting is self-contained make decisions about curriculum and instruction that impacts the students’ learning opportunities on a daily basis. In addition, students at the elementary level are at a critical time in their education during which they acquire the basic skills for learning and are more directly influenced by teachers’ expectations, giving the teacher as much or as little as teachers expect of them.

Anzul, Evans, King, and Tellier-Robinson (2001) assert that all too often the talents and strengths of special education students are undetected or overlooked, and throughout the course of their educational careers, special education students are viewed more in terms of their specific weakness rather than their total personalities, talents, interests, or the ways in which they function in other settings. The current qualitative study provides research that supports educators as they move from a preoccupation with deficit thinking to providing educational opportunities that take into account student strengths. The study is guided by the following research question and sub-questions:
R1. How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

R1a. What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities?

R1b. What factors contribute to a teacher’s willingness and/or ability to provide challenging curricula to students with intellectual disabilities?

R1c. How can our knowledge of teachers’ perspectives regarding the education of students with intellectual disabilities be used to better understand the role of social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities?

R1d. How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?

The study was based on three overarching assumptions that lie within the context of the following areas: (a) equity in learning opportunities, (b) teacher expectations, and (c) student achievement. First, it was assumed that students with intellectual disabilities have the right to equitable learning opportunities comparable to those provided to their typically developing peers. Second, teacher beliefs and expectations affect the instruction of students with intellectual disabilities. Third, all students with intellectual disabilities can learn and would benefit from instruction using the general education curriculum.

IDEA (1997) clarified that all students with disabilities are to have access to instruction focused on the same skills and knowledge as all other students. NCLB (2002) further clarified that schools are to be held accountable for the adequate yearly progress
of all groups of students, including students with intellectual disabilities. McGrew and Evans (2004) report the intended purpose of NCLB is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (p. 2). The current study provided an avenue for the participants to reveal their perspectives regarding learning opportunities they provide for students in their classrooms. This was essential considering the current mandates in place and the fact that the participants’ educational setting is a self-contained classroom.

The literature tells us that teacher expectations play a significant role in determining how well and how much students learn. Although the term teacher expectations has many definitions, the data in the present study revealed the participants’ curriculum expectations for their students from two perspectives: (a) the teacher’s prediction of how much academic progress the student will make over a period of time, and (b) the degree to which a teacher over- or under-estimates a student’s present level of performance. Teachers’ curricular and instructional decision-making is predicated upon how the teacher perceives the student’s ability. Bamburg (1994) reports a study conducted by Beez in 1970, who found that students labeled slow may receive fewer opportunities to learn than those labeled bright, and that slow students typically are taught less difficult material. The effect of such behavior is cumulative, and, over time, teachers’ predictions of student achievement may in fact become true (p. 2). According to Lane et al. (2003), it is important that teachers be clear in their expectations for student performance and cognizant of how their expectations converge and diverge with other
teachers. Further, it is also imperative that these expectations be taught explicitly to students.

Research conducted in the area of curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities suggests that aligning special education services and supports with standards-based reform efforts are increasingly important (Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, 2002; Wehmeyer et al, 2003). Wehmeyer, Sands et al.(2002) conclude that these students are frequently held to low expectations based on stereotypes and biases, are still highly likely to be educated in segregated settings, and often have access to alternative curricular options whose quality and appropriateness vary a great deal. The current study brings to the forefront curricular and instructional provided in three self-contained classrooms of students with intellectual disabilities and the opportunities available for access to the standards-based (academic) curriculum.

Discussion of Findings

The 1997 amendments to IDEA contained statutory language requiring that each student’s IEP include:

- A statement describing how the child’s disability affects the child’s involvement with and progress in the general curriculum;
- A statement of measureable goals to enable the child to be involved with and progress in the general curriculum;
- A statement of the services, program modifications, and supports necessary for the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum.

Wehmeyer et al. (2001) assert that as a result of these stipulations, educators need to reconsider the process by which the educational programs of students with intellectual
disabilities are designed and implemented to ensure that access to the general curriculum is provided (p. 327).


Our second principle is to improve results for students with disabilities through higher expectations and access to the general curriculum. We know that most children work harder and do better when more is expected of them -- whether it be in the classroom, doing their homework, or doing the dishes. Disabled students are no different. When we have high expectations for students with disabilities, most can achieve to challenging standards--and all can achieve to more than society has historically expected. However, not all schools have high expectations for these students, and not all schools take responsibility for the academic progress of disabled students. (as cited in Wehmeyer et al., 2001, p. 327)

Secretary Riley’s comments show that the purpose of the “access to the general curriculum” language is to ensure that students with disabilities are included in emerging standards-based reform and accountability systems as a means to raise expectations and ensure access to a challenging curriculum, an emphasis codified into law in the 1997 IDEA amendments (Wehmeyer et. al., 2001, p. 328). Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts that a substantial body of research over the last 40 years has found that the combination of teacher quality and curriculum quality explains most of the schools contribution to
achievement, and that access to curriculum opportunities is a more powerful determinate of achievement than the initial achievement levels (p.54). For these reasons, the framework that undergirds this study finds its root in the theory of social justice. As stated in Chapter Two, the literature that informs my understanding and relates to the four major assertions in this study is drawn from the theoretical perspectives of Apple (1979, 1990), Freire (1970, 1998), and Cochran-Smith (2004, 2008). The theories of Apple and Freire both emphasize the importance of bring democracy to the planned curriculum. Cochran-Smith, whose theories are grounded in those postulated by Apple and Freire, emphasizes the importance of recognizing the influence that teachers’ perspectives place on their instruction. The following assertions were derived from the foundations of this study:

- A continuum of instructional and curriculum practices are needed for students with intellectual disabilities that embed a variety of social, functional (often off-grade level) academic, and daily living skills within the ongoing activities and instruction using the general education curriculum;
- Administrative expectations of the teacher and the total school climate affect the degree to which the teacher provides equitable learning opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities;
- A teacher’s beliefs and expectations about a student’s ability determine the curriculum provided to that student and affect student achievement;
- The importance of independent functioning outweighs the importance of standards-based curriculum;
Standards-based (academic) curriculum versus functional curriculum. The design of the student’s educational program must take into account both the general curriculum and the student’s unique learning needs. Wehmeyer et al. (2003) maintain that individualization is a hallmark of special education practice, and IDEA access mandates require that students be involved in the general curriculum to the “maximum extent appropriate” (p. 270). The results of the present study suggest that the curricular and instructional decision-making of teachers of students with significant intellectual disabilities is driven by the students’ IEPs and functional curricula. This was evident as participants revealed the absence of a set curriculum for their students and maintained that the curriculum and instruction was developed from experience, ideas from other teachers, staff development, and anything seasonal.

The participants’ perspectives highlighted a functional outcome of education – that is the ability to live and work as a part of the community – as the guide to curriculum decision-making for their students. Clark (1994) states that this may or may not result from traditional academic curricula. However, for many students with significant intellectual disabilities, it will be necessary to include instructional activities and tasks that fall outside the context of standards-based (academic) curriculum (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). These authors are presupposing that the standards-based (academic) curriculum is at the forefront of instruction for the students with disabilities, though the participants in the current study revealed their students received minimal exposure to standards-based (academic) curriculum on their grade level. In fact, the findings affirmed that the majority of opportunities to access on-grade level curriculum standards were during GAA activities.
The curricular and instructional decision-making for students with significant intellectual disabilities often begins not with the general education curriculum, but rather with individually determined content needs. Two of the participants in this study reported the use of the curriculum standards in their instruction, although the standards were off-grade level. It appeared that these participants embedded the students’ individually-determined needs into the general curriculum. The results of the data revealed that the curricular and instructional decision-making of participants in this study fostered a more functional curriculum. However, there was consensus among all of the participants that the GAA process allowed for access to the general education standards as well as participation with the general education population.

Simply mapping some general education curriculum standards into the instruction does not serve to ensure equitable opportunities to access a challenging curriculum. Apple (1979) states that inequities are reinforced and reproduced by schools, though not by them alone, of course. “Through their curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative activities in day-to-day life in classrooms, schools play a significant role in preserving if not generating these inequalities …” (Apple, 1979, p. 63). According to Apple and Beane (2007), in an authentically democratic school, all young people are considered to have the right of access to all programs in the school and to the outcomes that the school values. Apple and Beane (2007) also propose that teachers in democratic schools understand that knowledge is socially constructed; it is produced and disseminated by people who have particular perspectives and biases. Often the curricular and instructional decision-making reflects the teacher’s construction of what is important to know and how it should be used, as suggested by the data in this study. A democratic curriculum seeks to help
students become knowledgeable and skilled in many ways. Apple and Beane (2007) theorize that it is our task to reconstruct dominant knowledge and employ it to help, not hinder, those who are marginalized in this society.

Goodlad and Oakes (1988) maintain that we need to consider the questionable notion that individual learning differences call for radically differentiated curriculum (p.16). Wehmeyer et al., (2002) state that ensuring access to the general curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities must begin with the curriculum planning and design process and the development of state and local standards. If students with widely varying skills, backgrounds, knowledge, and customs are to progress in the general curriculum, the standards upon which the curriculum is based, as well as the curriculum itself, must embody the principles of universal design and be written to be open-ended and inclusive (p.224). The term open-ended refers to “the amount of specificity and direction provided by curriculum standards, benchmarks, goals or objectives at both the building and classroom levels. Open-ended standards do not restrict the ways in which student’s exhibit knowledge or skills and focus more on the expectations that students will interact with the content, ask questions, manipulate materials, make observations, and then communicate their knowledge in a variety of ways” (Wehmeyer, Sands, et al., 2002, p. 224). Research suggests that open-ended designs allow for greater flexibility as to what, when, and how topics will be addressed in the classroom (Stainback, Stainback, Stefanich, & Alper, 1996) and are more consistent with universally designed curriculum, ensuring that more students, including students with intellectual disabilities, can show progress in the curriculum (Wehmeyer, Sands, et al, 2002). Goodlad and Oakes (1998) reveal the qualities of a universally designed curriculum to include: (1) providing
multiple representations of content; (2) providing multiple options for expression and control; and (3) providing multiple options for engagement and motivation. Open-ended standards and universally designed curriculum would allow for opportunities to access general education curriculum and embed functional skills that are also a critical part of the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities.

Effects of expectations. Wehmeyer et al. (2001) assert that the educational system and society need to ensure students with intellectual disabilities are held to high expectations and are provided ample opportunities to succeed within an educational program derived from the general curriculum and adapted or modified on an individual basis. The results of the present study suggest that the expectations of teachers of students with significant intellectual disabilities affects the curriculum and learning opportunities offered to this population. Often the expectations are driven by the teacher’s estimation of the student’s present level of performance and the teacher’s prediction of how much the student will learn in a designated amount of time. The participants in this study revealed expectations that correlate to a more functional curriculum, conveying the importance of their students becoming as independent as possible and contributing members of society. Statements made relating to accessing the general education curriculum such as, “As the students get older, the gap gets bigger,” and “The content of the curriculum standards is not as important for my students as daily living skills,” mirrors the expectations the teachers hold for their students.

Cotton (2001) states that expectations are based on the best information available about a student. Cotton (2001) further maintains that even if the initial expectations a teacher forms for a student are realistic and appropriate, student learning and self-concept
development can be limited as a result of sustained expectation effects. Bamburg (1994) claims that when a teacher misses an opportunity to improve student performance because he or she responds to a student based on how the teacher expects the student to perform rather than on other indices showing improved student potential, a sustaining expectation has occurred. Evidenced in the data, one of the participants expressed that her students were “profoundly intellectually disabled” and would not benefit from the general education curriculum. Linking the student’s performance to the label of profound intellectual disability fostered a sustained expectation, even though the student participated in activities correlated to the general education standards and passed the Georgia Alternate Assessment. Rolison and Medway (1985) assert that research has shown that teachers form expectations according to special education labels independent of other information about student capacity, with students with intellectual disabilities held to the lowest expectations. Wehmeyer et al. (2001) maintain labels that emphasize student incapacity and which are stigmatizing remain painfully prevalent in schools across the country. Such labels serve to limit expectations and reinforce stereotypes (p.331).

Given the power of teacher expectations to influence students' learning and their feelings about themselves, the necessity of holding high expectations for students with significant intellectual disabilities becomes more critical. Teachers can bridge the gap for this oppressed population to provide an education which cultivates learning opportunities equitable to those of their typical peers. Freire (1970) emphasizes the importance of an educator to stand at the side of the oppressed in solidarity; “solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture” (p. 49).
He argues that “true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these ‘beings for another’” (p. 49). Educators must stand at the side of the oppressed, undergo a conversion of sorts, and constantly re-examine themselves to stay focused and committed (p. 60). Hudalla (2005) states this may perhaps be one of the most important pieces of an education based around Freiren thought: without devotion, solidarity, reflection, and action the oppressed cannot begin to fight dehumanization (p.10).

Equitable opportunities. In their discussion of educational equity, De Valenzuela et al. (2006) assert that more than 100 years ago John Dewey argued that what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, the community must want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (p. 439). Hahn (1995) described an accepted view of equality of opportunity stating:

The basic conditions of equality in “the race of life” are satisfied as long as all of the contestants are lined up evenly at the starting line. But this metaphor ignores the context or the environment in which the competition is conducted. If the lane of the race track assigned to disabled contestants is filled with obstacles, for example, the competition can hardly be fair. And, for most disabled children, the obstacles presented by architectural inaccessibility, communication barriers, the effects of stigmatizing attitudes and the demands of a discriminatory environment often appear to be insurmountable. The solution, of course, is to “clear the track” by changing the environment instead of the person. (p. 6)
The results of the study suggest that the expectations of teachers of students with significant intellectual disabilities affects the curriculum and learning opportunities offered to this population. All of the participants provided opportunities for their students to access the general education setting during mandated GAA activities (a requirement on the rubric to acquire a passing score). However, only one of the participants revealed attempts to offer her students opportunities to access the curriculum in the general education setting. The results revealed that the participants were met with several barriers to providing these opportunities, which may have also directly impacted their level of expectations for their students. The participants made reference to barriers such as lack of resources (paraprofessional support), student behavior, scheduling, planning time, acceptance of students in the general education classrooms, and difficulty level of curriculum. In a study conducted by Agran et al. (2002), teachers ranked resistance from general educators, students’ challenging behaviors, and resistance from administrators as the three primary barriers to access (p. 130).

The research in the present study revealed social skills and communication skills as a critical part of the participants’ curriculum. Agran et al. (2002) contend that while social and communication skills are necessary for all students and are significant needs for those with significant disabilities, they may not be sufficient for access and participation in the general education curriculum. Social relationships and communication between students with and without disabilities are of undeniable importance. However, it seems logical to assume that the ability to make choices and achieve some level of competence in both standards-based (academic) and functional
(off-grade level) academic skills should also enhance access to the general education environment (p. 130).

According to McLaughlin (2010), a student with disabilities who is being treated equitably is being considered as an individual, is given full access to those aspects of life available to persons without disabilities, has opportunities to make decisions about both mundane and important life events, and has opportunities to become independent and self-sustaining. Cochran-Smith (2008) asserts that a theory of teaching practice that supports justice is not about specific techniques or best practices, but about guiding principles that play out in a variety of methods and strategies, depending on particular circumstances, students, content, and communities. Cochran-Smith (2008) also reports that many teacher education scholars have discussed in depth the nature of pedagogy and practice that foster justice. A common theme is developing caring relationships with students and providing rich and relevant learning opportunities for all students, including students with special needs.

**School culture.** Schools organized around democratic and collaborative cultures produce students with higher achievement and better levels of skills and understanding than do traditionally organized schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In addition, Fullan (1998) reported:

Student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative work cultures that foster a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continuously on improving instructional practice in light of student performance data, and link to standards and staff development support. (p. 8)
The findings of this study revealed that the participants had minimal opportunities to provide their students access to the general education curriculum outside of the self-contained classroom. Several barriers were brought to the forefront that hindered the participants’ attempts to provide these opportunities, including lack of resources (paraprofessional support), student behavior, scheduling, planning time, acceptance of students in the general education classrooms, and difficulty level of curriculum. These barriers reflect the organization and culture of the school environment. According to Cunningham and Gresso (1993) school culture is an informal understanding of the “way we do things around here” (p. 20). Culture is a strategic body of learned behaviors that give both meaning and reality to its participants (p. 20). Barth (2002) asserts that culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. Culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act (p. 7).

Ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities requires a school culture that highlights inclusive practices. According to Friend and Bursuck (2006), inclusive practice is a term used to describe a professional belief that students with disabilities should be integrated into general education classrooms whether or not they can meet traditional curricular standards and should be full members of those classrooms (p. 511). Schools need a strong set of commonly held norms and values, a primary focus upon teaching that supports student learning, open dialogue, and collaboration among all members of the organization. This change would require a reculturing of schools. The work of Fullan (1998) emphasizes the reculturing of schools
as a major premise: Schools need to “break the bonds of dependency” created by the increasingly permeable boundaries between schools and the external environment (p. 6). The author sites two conditions that contribute to the dependency: overload and packaged solutions (p.6). As the external environment continues to permeate the school walls, principals experience increasing overload as a result of demands, such as new educational reforms, policy mandates, and legislation. Dependency has also been created by prepackaged external solutions. Principals are continuously pressured to implement the latest “recipe for success,” even though school improvement is “exceedingly complex and it changes as educators work with their organization’s unique personalities and cultural conditions (Fullan, 1998, p. 7).”

According to Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008), leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in an organization. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) maintain that leaders are agents of change, and extend the responsibility for the role of change agent beyond principals to teachers, emphasizing teachers as the key to improvement. A major leadership practice suggested by Leithwood et al. (2008) is developing a shared purpose and vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals and demonstrating high-performance expectations (p.30). Teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, along with administration, play major roles in developing a culture within the schools that emphasizes the importance of ensuring that this population is provided a challenging education that fosters social justice.

Students can and do learn in an inclusive setting. Knight (1999) asserts that structures need to be set up in schools to support teachers and students as they attempt to bring about changes in their thinking, attitudes, and practice. “A policy should detail how
needs will be met and the strategies that will be used to implement inclusion so as to ensure that real (not superficial) inclusion is visible in classroom practice” (Knight, 1999, p. 4). Overcoming the barriers to bridge the gap between general education and special education will require the reculturing of schools, transforming the culture of the organization and changing the way things are done. According to Fullan (2001), new ways of doing things need to be in line with moral purpose, but also appropriate to collaboration and the building and testing of knowledge (p. 48).

**Implications for P-12 Practice**

**Teacher perspectives.** Conceptions of equity are complicated by an education system that was designed to provide a model education to large numbers of children as efficiently as possible while at the same time responding to the diverse and challenging educational needs of underserved students. As a means to promote social justice for students with intellectual disabilities, future work in education should craft a transformative model that tackles individual as well as historical and structural forces because the “transformation of the social identity of one group (the disabled) will not occur if the social identity of the other group (the abled) remains intact” (Christensen, 1996, p. 76). Students with intellectual disabilities need educational environments where they are challenged, where they are believed to be able to learn, and where they are not doomed by the low expectations of others. They also require an educational system that will eliminate the historical deficit perspective. The transformative view to social justice examines ideological and historical assumptions about difference. The social identity of this group should be viewed as contributing members of society and members of the school community. There is a clear message throughout the literature that teachers’
perspectives have a profound impact on classroom life, including curricular and instructional decision making. Teachers who are willing to explore their beliefs, and how their beliefs relate to practice and the professional knowledge base, can capitalize on the beliefs they hold to promote students' intellectual growth, autonomy and reciprocity, and equity in their classrooms.

**Equitable learning opportunities in special education.** To ensure that equitable learning opportunities are at the forefront of their curriculum and decision-making for students with significant intellectual disabilities, teachers need opportunities for ongoing, courageous conversations with school staff to assist in revealing beliefs, expectations, and assumptions about this population of students. This could be accomplished through opportunities for daily reflection with self and/or co-workers and allowing time to make daily contact with general education teachers to develop and share activities correlated to the standards. Wehmeyer et al. (2003) propose that when the general curriculum includes content related to transition from school to adult life, independent living, health and well-being, and other areas typically conceptualized as “functional” content, there will be less of a need to provide instruction that is not within the scope of the general curriculum (p. 269). A transformative view to social justice incorporates distributing resources to nurture wide and meaningful engagement. The results of the study suggest that there are obstacles that deter from equitable learning opportunities offered to students with significant intellectual disabilities. Lack of resources was identified as one of those obstacles. Adequate resources need to be available; teachers’ efficacy stalls when resources are low or scarce.
**Curriculum and pedagogy.** According to Ryndak, Moore, Orlando & Delano (2008), the passage of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) has led to the current iteration of curriculum focus, with the emphasis now being on involvement in and progress on the general curriculum. Such access for students with extensive support needs, however, is sporadic, potentially because of personal and systemic beliefs about these learners, the level of knowledge about research-based instructional approaches for these students, and perceptions of the three overarching concepts (i.e., the purpose of schooling, the primacy of equity of opportunity, and the presumption of competence) (p. 205). Barriers identified within this study, including lack of resources (paraprofessional support), student behavior, scheduling, planning time, acceptance of students in the general education classrooms, and difficulty level of curriculum, are challenges facing teachers who are mandated to ensure that each student receives equitable opportunities to access the general education curriculum (Ryndak et al., 2008). The quick fixes and simplistic approaches have been tried and rejected. Research clearly indicates that students with extensive support needs benefit more from receiving instruction when they are in general education contexts, and their instruction focuses on both general education curriculum and functional activities within those contexts (Agran et al., 2002; Soukup et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, 2006). Nolet and McLaughlin (2005) state that providing access to the general curriculum will require a new way of thinking about both special education and individual students with disabilities (p. 15).

The findings in the study revealed that the curricular and instructional decision-making for students with intellectual disabilities is based upon the student’s IEP. Curriculum opportunities beyond those outlined in the IEP are developed based on
teachers’ experiences, perspectives, and ideas from other teachers. It would be critical to provide teachers systematic, intensive training on developing and providing challenging curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities that included both standards-based (academic) and functional (off-grade level) curriculum. Administrative support for school-wide training in the area of intellectual disabilities focusing on the student’s ability and the effect of adult expectations on their performance is imperative. Also, adequate curricular materials and other classroom equipment and resources are needed to ensure appropriate access to curriculum for the students and keep teachers from feelings of hopelessness.

**Implications for Teacher Preparation**

Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts that the key to an equitable education system is providing excellent education to all students. Such a system not only prepares all teachers and school leaders well for the challenging work they are asked to do, but it ensures that schools are organized to support both student and teacher learning, and that the standards, curriculum, and assessments that guide their work encourage the kind of knowledge and abilities needed in the 21st century (p.26). This calls for the need to reinvent teacher preparation and professional development, so teachers can meet the 21st century learning needs and develop sophisticated skills.

The study revealed that teachers’ perceptions, biases, and expectations influence their curricular and instructional decision-making. We can assume that pre-service candidates probably bring preconceptions and personal beliefs to the study of pedagogy and that these personal beliefs are resistant to change. According to Kagan (1992), studies of pre-service teachers have shown that candidates enter programs with well-
established beliefs about students and classrooms. Kurtz and Paul (2005) maintain that there is a need for pre-service teachers to enter the classroom with the disposition to focus on individual strengths and to understand how the diversity of students’ abilities and backgrounds contribute to the subjective well-being of the student population. Dan Lortie (1975) stated:

Teaching is unusual in that those who decide to enter it have had exceptional opportunity to observe members of the occupation at work; unlike most occupations today, the activities of teachers are not shielded from youngsters. Teachers-to-be underestimate the difficulties involved, but this supports the contention that those planning to teach form definite ideas about the nature of the role. (p. 65)

Pre-service teachers must reflect on their own knowledge and beliefs about students with disabilities. Through the reflective process, any prejudices and/or biases may surface, and conversations can begin to refocus the future teachers in more positive directions.

Cochran-Smith (2008) contends that for teacher education, a theory of justice has three key ideas that are imbricated and integrated with one another: (a) equity of learning opportunity, (b) respect for social groups, and (c) acknowledging and dealing with tensions. Preparation of pre-service teachers for the education of students should assume a radically different kind of accountability to include rich and real learning opportunities for all students, outcomes for students that include true preparation for participation in a diverse democratic society, and roles for teachers as activists as well as educators. Promoting equity in learning opportunities and outcomes for all students simultaneously challenges classroom (and societal) practices, policies, labels, and assumptions that
reinforce inequities (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p. 13). Teacher education programs that prepare pre-service teachers to tackle this phenomenon are ultimately fostering teachers to practice justice in education.

**Implications for Society and the Moral Imperative that Drives Educational Equity and Intent**

In our society, people often view students with intellectual disabilities as needing help, always receiving and never giving. Through the use of standards-based (academic) curriculum, within and outside the self-contained setting, the contrary can be realized as individuals see and/or participate with this marginalized group as they experience curriculum instruction equitable to non-disabled peers. Clark (1994) reminds us that through the access to the general curriculum and inclusionary practices, one will learn to value all people as participating members in society instead of as separate groups of givers and receivers. To promote such social change, future endeavors to create programs that incorporate the general education curriculum with a functional curriculum should be encouraged.

Freire (1998) firmly believes that the purpose of any form of education is the same as it is for all education, the fulfillment of human potential and subsequently the betterment of the human condition. For Freire, educational change must be accompanied by significant changes in the social and political structure in which education takes place (p. 49). Lipsky and Gartner (1989) assert that the effort required of educators, parents, the government, and citizens at large, is to fashion educational programs to achieve excellence and equity for all students (p. 255). Society, as a whole, has the task of developing educational services for all students and assuming responsibility for student
success in learning and in personal development. Despite everything we can do, or hope to do, to assist each physically or mentally disabled achieve his or her maximum potential in life, our efforts will not succeed until we have found the way to remove the obstacles to this goal directed by human society (p.256). The findings of the investigation identified teacher beliefs and expectations as major obstacles to providing students with intellectual disabilities learning opportunities equitable to those of their typical peers. It can be assumed that these same obstacles are prevalent in the community as well. Freire emphasizes the importance of an educator to stand at the side of the oppressed in solidarity. It is equally important for society to do the same.

**Limitations**

The most important limitation of this study is one of generalizability, in that the findings of the research may not directly reflect nor adequately represent all comments and opinions of teachers who teach students with intellectual disabilities. Within critical research, there are sometimes false expectations relative to the kind of information that fieldwork can reveal. An additional limitation is the amount of information collected in the time available. Research on critical approach methods reveals that a significant amount of time should be spent in observations, including multiple sessions and time to build a rapport with the participants.

Another limitation is the fact that some participants may express views thought to be consistent with the social standard. The participants may feel that what is accepted as the norm in society is acceptable for all individuals. This social desirability bias may lead participants to censor their actual views. The participants may be fearful that their comments and perspectives will be exposed to others within the educational environment
or community. Building trust and credibility at the field site and getting people to respond are both important access challenges that could be limitations to the study.

A final limitation is the fact that my own particular stance on this topic may prevent me from acknowledging all dimensions of the experiences. It was imperative that I identify and acknowledge my own personal biases and perceptions on the issue in order to prevent the possibility of this limitation. Multiple data collection techniques were used to attend to the disadvantage of bias: ideological surveys, observations, in-depth interview transcriptions from all three participants, and collages.

**Recommendations**

Although the present case study has presented in-depth examination and analysis of the perspectives of self-contained special education teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, I would nevertheless redesign the study in several ways. First, I would conduct the study using a larger sample size. The present study used three participants, although a greater number of cases would increase generalizability. Also, gaining perspectives of both special education teachers in self-contained classrooms and special education teachers in general education classrooms has great potential for explaining the similarities and differences that exist among them. By varying the context, I would be able to make comparisons across cases, thus strengthening my conclusions.

Another consideration for future research is to implement mixed methods within the data collection. According to Yin (2009), mixed methods case studies are more difficult to execute than studies limited to single methods. However, mixed methods research forces the methods to share the same research questions, to collect complimentary data, and to conduct counterpart analysis to follow a mixed methods
design. Mixed methods research can permit investigators to collect a richer and stronger array of data than can be accomplished by a single method alone (p. 63). For the present study, a survey could be developed to examine the perspectives of general education teachers, as well as teachers of students with intellectual disabilities relating to providing equitable learning opportunities for students with significant intellectual disabilities.

The results of the study clearly reveal that students with significant intellectual disabilities continue to need skills in the areas of socialization and daily living. The data show that the skills necessary for these students to function independently in the community are at the forefront of the teachers’ curricular and instructional decision-making. Therefore, there is a call for more research focused on how to embed a variety of social, functional academic, and daily living skills within the ongoing activities and instruction using the general education curriculum. According to Clark (1994), there is a need to view outcomes-based education more broadly than as simply increasing academic achievement scores and higher-order thinking. Education should advocate functional, generalizable skills for responsible citizenship as the ends and academic skills as the means to those ends. This broader view of outcomes for education provides special educators who want a functional approach a window of opportunity to choose to be a part of a single educational system that takes responsibility for all students.

Lastly, it is evident that learning opportunities which incorporate standards-based (academic) curriculum can be provided in the self-contained classroom and/or general education classroom. Findings suggest that special educators meet resistance from general educators when providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in activities within the general education classroom. This signals the need for
more research to increase our understanding of the basis for resistance from general educators and how to alleviate their concerns about access.

**Conclusion**

This study reflects the passion I have for ensuring students with intellectual disabilities are offered learning opportunities equitable to those of their typical peers. The topic originated from a conversation that I experienced with the parent of a new student about to attend my self-contained middle school classroom for students with intellectual disabilities. The student is non-verbal and uses a pre-programmed voice output device to communicate his wants and needs. I was meeting the parent at open-house before the first day of school. My question to her was, “What would you like for your child to learn this year?” She stated, “I want him to learn to spell so that he can tell me things when we are in the community and more importantly that he can communicate with others.” As I reflected on our conversation, I began to ask myself why this objective was not addressed in elementary school. Did teacher beliefs and expectations influence the decision not to provide the student instruction in this area?

The literature reminds us that the elementary years are critical for learning basic skills. It is also a time when students are more sensitive to teacher expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). It is my belief that all children can learn if teachers are willing to teach them. Teachers must first believe students can overcome challenges, so they can then work to help the students do so. I maintained high expectations for the new student in my class, and by the end of the year he was spelling four letter words with blends. He generalized the new skill from the classroom to the community by spelling what he wanted to look at in the store.
This scenario is an example of high teacher expectations and fostering the belief that all students have the right to equitable learning opportunities, which is consistent with my assertion that a teacher’s beliefs and expectations about a student’s ability affect the teacher’s curricular and instructional decision-making and impacts student achievement. The student in this scenario achieved academic progress and demonstrated progress in embedded functional skills. This is consistent with a major assertion in this study that a continuum of instructional and curriculum practices are needed for students with intellectual disabilities that embed a variety of social, functional (often off-grade level) academic, and daily living skills within the ongoing activities and instruction using the general education curriculum. Teachers’ expectations for whether students can master the curriculum partially determine the opportunity students have to learn (Brophy, 1988). When teachers have low expectations for students, they tend to tolerate more non-attending behaviors from those students, spend less time on academic instruction and cover less of the curriculum (Proctor, 1984).

I continue to have high expectations and offer equitable learning opportunities for my students with intellectual disabilities. I guess more importantly, I continue to demonstrate to others that all students can learn in order to minimize the deficit thinking that oppresses this population. The principal at my school observed my classroom as I was conducting a lesson on the differences between cones and cylinders. At the end of the lesson she stated, “You always told me they could do it, but now I see it with my own eyes.”
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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

My signature below indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to participate in the study titled Equity of Learning Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: A Case Study of Elementary Teachers, to be conducted between the dates of May 2010 to December 2010.

I understand the purpose of the research project will be to investigate teacher beliefs associated with a social justice stance toward equity in learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

1. Participant will respond to a visual data prompt by making a collage.
2. Participant will respond to open-ended and in-depth biographical questions in an interview.
3. Participant will be observed in the classroom for three sessions.
4. Participant will respond to a Curriculum Ideologies Inventory.

Potential benefits of the study are: Provide for the student: increased exposure to general education curriculum, increased student achievement, increase in effective strategies for teaching students with intellectual disabilities, and increase in students’ self-esteem. Provide for the teacher: avenues to acknowledge biases and assumptions, development of common mission and vision, and maintaining equity in learning opportunities for all students. There is a need for research on achieving social justice by providing equity in learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. The NCLB Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) now requires students to meet adequate yearly progress in academic areas, but there is not research to support methodologies for the teachers to assist students in meeting this criterion. This study will be one small step in helping teachers acknowledge the importance of equity in learning opportunities that will increase student achievement.

Any unauthorized disclosure of confidential information is illegal as provided in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1973 (FERPA) and in the implementing federal regulations found in 34 CFR Part 99. The participation in a research study by students, parents, and school staff is strictly voluntary. The participant will be asked to sign two copies of the consent letter, the researcher will keep one and participant will keep a copy.

Any data, datasets, or outputs that may be generated from data collection efforts throughout the duration of the research study are confidential and the data are to be protected. Data will not be distributed to any unauthorized person. Data with names or other identifiers will be disposed of when their use is complete.
I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw from the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

- The identity of participants will be protected. No pictures will be used. In all written material, including data collection sheets, produced either for this descriptive study or for any other appropriate professional presentation purpose, pseudonyms will be used by the researcher.
- Information gathered during the course of the project will become part of the data analysis and may contribute to published research reports and presentations.
- There are no foreseeable inconveniences or risks involved to the person participating in the study.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect employment status or annual evaluations. If I decide to withdraw permission after the study begins, I will notify the researcher of my decision.

If further information is needed regarding the research study, I can contact Shari McCrary at Woodstock Middle School, 2000 Towne Lake Hills South Drive, Woodstock, Ga. 30189, (770) 592-3516

Signature_______________________________________________________________
Participant      Date

Signature_______________________________________________________________
Researcher      Date
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<th>Research Question - What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know this?</th>
<th>From which data sources will answers be elicited?</th>
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| How do teachers’ perspectives differentially influence their curricular and instructional decision-making to provide equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities? | • Social Justice for students with intellectual disabilities  
• Empowerment for SWID  
• Teacher opportunity to reflect on their own biases and assumptions about SWID  
• Identify connections between pedagogy and beliefs/expectations  
• Implications for educational practice | • In-depth biographical interviews  
• Classroom observations  
• Collages  
• Ideology survey (captures intentions) |
| What perspectives do teachers hold regarding students with intellectual disabilities? | • Social Justice for students with intellectual disabilities  
• Empowerment for SWID  
• Teacher opportunity to reflect on their own biases and assumptions about SWID  
• Identify connections between pedagogy and beliefs/expectations  
• Implications for educational practice | • In-depth biographical interviews  
• Collages  
• Open-ended interviews  
• Open-ended interview questions  
• Observation  
• Collage  
• Ideology survey  
• Open-ended interviews |
| social justice as it relates to educating students with intellectual disabilities? | • Decrease “deficit” thinking  
• Raise teacher expectations for SWID  
• Opportunities for reflection  
• Enhance learning opportunities for SWID | • Ideology survey  
• Open-ended interview |

How can teachers’ self-knowledge of their perspectives on students with intellectual disabilities be used as a catalyst in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities?
APPENDIX C: IN-DEPTH BIOGRAPHICAL CASE STUDY INTERVIEW

QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?
2. Where were you born?
3. How old are you?
4. Where did you go to college?
5. Did you continue education after your bachelor degree?
6. Are you considering furthering your education?
7. What type of degree did you get?
8. Have you always taught in Special Education? If not, in what other areas have you taught?
9. What experience do you have with students with intellectual disabilities?
10. When you were in elementary school, do you remember seeing or interacting with students with disabilities?
11. Have you always taught at the elementary level? If not, at what other levels have you taught?
12. What do you currently teach?
APPENDIX D: OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does curriculum mean to you?
2. Can you give me some examples of curriculum in your classroom?
3. What kind of curriculum worker are you? Do you work with others to develop your curriculum or does it come from your experience?
4. Do you think your intentions behind teaching guide your curriculum?
5. What expectations do you have for your students?
6. Where do you get your curriculum?
7. What subjects do you teach?
8. What does your schedule look like?
9. What learning goals do you have for your students? How much time do you spend on those goals?
10. To what extent do these goals reflect the curriculum standards?
11. How do your students learning activities differ from their non-disabled peers?
12. What do you consider a learning opportunity?
13. How do learning opportunities come about?
14. When is it right to offer a learning opportunity to one student and not another?
15. Should all students have the same learning opportunity?
16. Should we treat all students equally in terms of what they should learn?
17. Should we treat all students equitably?
18. What do you like best about teaching?
19. What is it about teaching that makes you feel good/important/useful?

20. How is your job different from a teacher who does not teach students with disabilities? (curriculum, resources, etc.)

21. How often do you reflect on your teaching? How/when

22. How has reflecting changed your teaching?

23. What is the best compliment you have received? (parent, student, peer?)

24. What does FAPE mean to you?

25. What was your best day ever as a teacher?

26. What is the vision you have for your students?

27. What are the advantages/disadvantages about GAA?

28. What is the purpose of school?

29. What would you consider an ideal teacher?

30. Are learning opportunities structured by good teachers or happen by chance?

31. What do you believe is the most important thing about knowledge where we get it/ how we use it?

32. What do you know to be true about education?

33. How have your beliefs about education evolved/changed over the course of the last several years?

34. What is it about your current role that has changed your beliefs about teaching and learning?

35. Explain “Wholeheartedness” (what brings us to teaching/what keeps us in teaching).
36. Do you believe that the general education curriculum is relevant to your students?
   Why/why not

37. What pieces of the gen ed curriculum are relevant to your students?

38. Have you ever stepped outside of your comfort zone? (What and how you typically teach)

39. What would prompt you to step out of your comfort zone?

40. What avenues are available to you for changing the learning opportunities you offer to your students?
APPENDIX E: CURRICULUM IDEOLOGIES INVENTORY

Directions: Read the following eight sets of four ideologies. Determine the ideology that is most like you and least like you. Then rank order each set of statements from 1 to 4, with 1 being the most like you and 4 being the least like you.

Set 1:
_____ Schools should facilitate the construction of a new and more just social order that will offer maximum satisfaction to its members.

_____ Schools should efficiently fulfill the needs of society by training youth to function as mature constructive members of society.

_____ Schools should be communities where youth learn the knowledge accumulated by their culture.

_____ Schools should be enjoyable places where children develop naturally according to their felt needs as those needs present themselves from day to day.

Set 2:
______ The teacher should be a supervisor of student learning who utilizes instructional strategies that will optimize student learning.

______ Teachers should be companions to students who use the environment within which the student lives to help the student learn.

______ Teachers should be aids to children who help them learn by presenting them with experiences from which they can make meaning.

______ The teacher should be a knowledgeable person who transmits that which is known to those who do not know it.

Set 3:
______ Learning best proceeds when the student is presented with the right stimulus materials and judicious reinforcement.

______ Learning best proceeds when the teacher clearly presents to the student that knowledge which the student is to acquire.
Learning best takes place when as the result of creative self-expression on the part of the child; the child himself makes sense out of his interactions with his environment.

Learning best occurs when a student confronts a real social crisis and participates in the construction of a solution to that crisis.

Set 4:

The knowledge of most worth is the structured knowledge and way of thinking that have come to be valued by the culture over time.

The knowledge of most worth is the personal knowledge of oneself and one’s world that comes from one’s direct experience in the world and one’s personal response to such experience.

The knowledge of most worth are those specific skills and capabilities for action that allow the individual to live a constructive life.

The knowledge of most worth is a set of social ideals, a commitment to those ideals, and an understanding of how to go implementing those ideals.

Set 5:

The essence of childhood is that it is a time of learning that prepares one for adulthood when one will be a constructive contributing member of society.

The essence of childhood is that it is a period of intellectual development for neophytes being absorbed into the culture—the prime features of the developing mind being its memory and its reasoning ability.

The essence of childhood lies in the child’s natural goodness. Growth of the child is to be primarily directed toward the uniqueness of the individual as he is during children rather than as he might be during adulthood.

The essence of childhood is that it is a time for practice in and preparation for acting upon society to both improve one’s own self and the nature of society.

Set 6:

“To understand one’s culture,” should be our slogan.

“To possess the skills which will allow one to perform well within one’s society,” should be our slogan.

“Natural growth of the child,” should be our slogan.
“To reconstruct society in order to make it a better place to live in,” should be our slogan.

Set 7:

Evaluation should objectively determine if the evaluee can or cannot achieve a specific predetermined task; it is for the purpose of certifying to others whether or not the evaluee can perform the task.

Evaluation should be useful in stimulating the evaluee’s learning in a non-evaluative manner; it is primarily for the benefit of the evaluee.

Evaluation should be a subjective comparison of the evaluee’s performance with his capabilities; it is both to indicate to others and the evaluee the extent to which he is living up to his capabilities.

Evaluation should objectively rank order evaluee’s from best to worst with respect to the amount of knowledge they have acquired; it is to demonstrate to others the comparative degree of intellectual development of those being evaluated.

Set 8:

A good education should provide the student with the freedom to constructively function within adult society in the manner he desires by providing him with the variety of social behaviors and technical skills he will need to do so.

A good education should provide the student with the freedom to control society and the destiny of society.

A good education should provide the student with the freedom from the influence of society so that he can develop naturally in accordance with this organic self.

A good education should provide the student with freedom from the restrictions of society and nature by giving him knowledge about society and nature, which will allow him to understand them and thus avoid the ways in which they control him.
**Directions:** Write your responses in column 2. Next plot and color-code your responses. For each set of responses, identify your top two (statements that you gave a #1 or #2) in one color. Then plot your lowest statement (#4’s) in another color.

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APPENDIX F: PROMPTS FOR VISUAL DATA

1. How would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?

2. If you had unlimited resources, how would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
APPENDIX G: TEACHER DEVELOPED COLLAGES

Collage 1 – Riley

How would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
Collage 2 – Riley

If you had unlimited resources, how would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
Collage 1 – Sandra

How would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
Collage 2 – Sandra

If you had unlimited resources, how would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
Collage 1 – Maria

How would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?
Collage 2 – Maria

If you had unlimited resources, how would you visually represent the curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities?