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Negotiating DSE Teaching Identity in Today’s Public Schools: Complexity, Camaraderie, & Subversion

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Abstract

This dissertation explored the experiences and perspectives of eleven classroom teachers who self-identify and commit to disability studies in their practices in their current roles as teachers in k-12 schools. The study uncovered the lived experience of what it means to take on a disability studies in education (DSE) identity, including the particular pedagogical methods and strategies that these teachers assigned to and named as DSE. Through phenomenological interviewing, participant’s experiences around practicing their identities were recorded and analyzed. The data collected offers a glimpse into how a DSE identity manifests itself within today’s schools, including the complicated and complex personal experiences working within, along with talking back to and reframing the system (of special education and public education). Overall, the study describes the interplay between the meanings that participants confer to their individual ideological commitments, alongside the heightened demands of normative performance that the standards and accountability-based reform has established within today’s schools. In particular, the study focuses on the small and nuanced ways participants have taken up critical practices in order to maintain a DSE identity within their schools and classrooms. Their experiences converged and diverged at various points and their stories were both heartbreaking and heartwarming. Overall, however, they represent the continued labor that critical educators must engage in to maintain a positive sense of self and enact their pedagogical beliefs as educators. In sharing their stories, I hope to provide a glimpse into how these educators conceptualized and experienced DSE in relation to their professional and personal lives.
NEGOTIATING DSE TEACHING IDENTITY IN TODAY’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: COMPLEXITY, CAMARADERIE, & SUBVERSION

by

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I remember talking to the principal about one of my students, completely sure that I knew what was right, but completely unsure of how to talk to someone in authority. I sat wondering how to discuss the fact that I believed fundamentally that how we were servicing these kids, those identified with what were assumed to be more “challenging” disabilities, was not right. I sat uneasy in the chair, pushing my foot up and down against the floor, wondering how he would respond to my requests and questions. I thought hard about how and what I could say to make my point about one of my students moving into the general education and inclusive classrooms.

I met Shacora my second year teaching; she seemed like a twenty-eight-year-old stuck in a fourteen-year-old body. She was smart—the type of girl who asked complex questions, dug deeper, and had an enthusiasm for school that made it difficult not to be excited yourself; whether it be about Wizard’s Chess in Harry Potter, the quadratic formula, or the effects of globalization on our local economy, she was a voracious learner. Nonetheless, she was placed in the 15:1 class with me all day. I knew her needs were not being met and could be addressed more appropriately within an inclusive classroom. I just had to get her into that space. I thought at that time, for her sake and hopefully the future of my other students, that she could make the case for inclusion, that she could prove these students should be included—but at that moment I hoped that I could state her case without stepping on the administrators’ or anyone else’s toes. I was young, a rookie teacher; it was my second year teaching. Presumably, one could ask, ‘what did I know?’

We sat for a few moments. First he complimented me on how I had avoided sending the kids to the office as much as the last teacher. I nodded, possibly hoping to use this as ammunition to plead Shacora’s case. “So,” he said, “what can I help you with?” I looked up, fumbling with my pen, and looked down at the notes I had compiled on the page, beginning with what I had rehearsed earlier.

“Well, I would like to propose putting her in the inclusion class. I really think…” Interruption. Halt. “Well, have you looked at these numbers?” He leafed through the manila folder, quickly passing through previous and current documentation. He started again, “Have you looked at these previous IEPs?”

His stern look and furrowed brow said it all: I was stepping over an unwritten boundary—the documentation told it all. To him, she was in the right place. The words on the official documents were proof enough: “reading disability, disruptive, benefits from a small class size.” The conversation trailed off. My arguments, my ammunition, both figuratively and literally crumpled in my hands. I felt defeated.
Frustration filled me and I could feel the red come to my checks. I could not hide my emotions; the corners around my eyes tensed, as fumes of anger filled me—but the meeting was over. We met again and again that year, more ammunition, more points—the slow and arduous chipping away, piece by piece, eventually making a “deal” that would allow her to participate in English class, but she would remain with me until she had proven herself.

I taught for two more years, learning how to slowly fight the system, to continually push against the assumptions surrounding disability—knowing my students were capable and maintaining high expectations for them, even though others did not have these same expectations. I pushed more students into inclusive and general education classrooms. It was a tough fight and even though I was making small changes, I continually swayed back and forth. Working with students and seeing their potential was amazing, but at the same time questioning the morality and ethics pertaining to how we were servicing students and what I thought was right was wearing me down.

I pushed boundaries at times, still wide-eyed and idealistic and holding strong to that gut feeling of what a just education could or should be, yet I often came back to the room with white walls, no windows, fifteen desks, and an overhead projector. The segregated space was still here and still being used to house me and students like Shacora.

I dreaded going to school. I wasn’t the super teacher I imagined I would be—like one of those teachers you see in the movies—changing the school and the institution, all shiny and unyielding, even if it was cliché. Over and over again, I heard the same responses, “We can’t do this...”, “This is not how we’ve done it...”, “These students can’t...” But I knew that they could if given the chance. I kept asking myself, ‘Why do these students have to prove this? Why do these labels lead to segregation and seclusion?’ I could not fight the fight anymore, not alone. I wrote my letter of resignation slowly, aching as each letter fell from my fingers to the keyboard.

Eventually Shacora made her way out of the self-contained class, having to prove herself every step of the way. She was included throughout high school and graduated with a Regents Diploma. After graduation, she entered and graduated from a certificate vocational program. She now has a full-time job, an apartment, and an active social life. She made it on her own terms, following her own dreams. We talk from time to time about boys, jobs, life. She is happy, as happy as any twenty-year-old starting out could be.

I’m not sure she fully understands that she started it all for me.

My own experiences within special education frame much of this work. I questioned what I had come to understand and know as common sense about disability and special
education after entering the field. How could we treat students like Shacora in these marginalizing ways? How could isolation from general education classes, peers, and community help students be exposed to and understand grade-level curriculum or prepare them for a good life? Moreover, as a former self-contained teacher, I thought, “How could I make space for my students and parents to be heard, when so many people around me had already decided that they knew professionally what was best for them?” How could students who had complex emotional needs be asked to be in the same room and follow the same schedule all day, with no embedded socio-emotional supports to ensure their success? How could others hold such low expectations of these students? Even more, I wondered, “How could I support my students in gaining confidence when they were continually belittled by other students, teachers, administrators, and systems in which their label constituted whether or not they were secluded or included within the school? Deep down I knew that something about the system was wrong and I began to question its fairness and equity, although I was largely without the depth of perception around what I was feeling or the language to support or articulate my suspicions.

Historically and presently, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) has positioned special education as a distinctly different entity from general education; in order to qualify for services, students must be diagnosed with a disorder and affixed with a label (Baker, 2002; Danforth & Gabel, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Ware, 2001). Thus, foundationally, special education has been situated within a medical model, which constructs youth with disabilities as individually or culturally inadequate and locates the “problem” of disability as innate to the individual, rather than a function of the structural or ideological dimensions of an oppressive and inequitable system that students with
disabilities must navigate (Wright, 2008). Thus, “the language and practices of special education work to create and maintain the ‘disabled subject’” (Rice, 2008, p. 19). Our current operationalization of special education within today’s public schools, therefore, creates environments in which the positioning of students identified with disabilities as deficient and incapable is legitimatized, promulgating a framework of cure, remediation, and/or treatment as endorsable and acceptable (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Mutua & Smith, 2008). It was not until I enrolled in my first disability studies course that I was able to more fully comprehend and gain access to a language to corroborate the stigmatization and marginalization that I observed students like Shacora experiencing within special education. That coursework changed how I perceived special education and continues to inform my understanding of the inhibitive practices that are inherent within special education and often drive educational practice. That exposure also remolded my teaching identity and provided me with the tools to critically question and evaluate whom current educational practices are benefitting, particularly in regard to students with disabilities.

**Framing this work**

Disability studies in education (DSE) seeks to engage with these underlying oppressive tendencies that exist and have become known as special education, particularly intersecting with the work individuals practice within schools (Mutua & Smith, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Ware, 2005). DSE is an:

interdisciplinary field of scholarship that critically examines issues related to the dynamic interplays between disability and various aspects of culture and society. [It] unites critical inquiry and political advocacy … it promotes the importance of
infusing analyses and interpretations of disability throughout all forms of educational research, teacher education, and graduate studies in education (Gabel & Danforth, 2009, p. 378).

In this manner, DSE provides a foundation for social justice within special education. In particular, teacher education programs that are framed by a DSE perspective ask teachers to “share a commitment to education as a site from which to work toward greater equity, more pluralism, and less oppression” (Oyler, 2011, p. 4). DSE seeks to and includes research, policy, and action, which:

- Contextualize[s] disability within political and social sphere
- Privilege[s] the interest, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people
- Promote[s] social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people
- Assume[s] competence and reject deficit models of disability (“Disability Studies SIG,” 2015)

At these critical intersections between traditional notions of special education and transformative possibilities of DSE, individual and collective teacher identities are being formed and reformed based on the knowledges that are being made available. These knowledges, whether they are based on institutional or personal experiences, work to construct teachers’ identities and subsequently their practices within schools.

Individuals who have graduated from teacher education programs that are pedagogically grounded in DSE and other social justice frameworks are provided with tools to question what has become perceived as normative within schooling and with pedagogical tools to disrupt damaging discourses that position some students as deficient (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011). Particularly, universities and colleges that provide teacher education framework(s) grounded in DSE challenge the narrow and prescriptive
approaches to disability and special education (Routel, 2013). At this critical juncture, DSE can provide teachers with language and tools to question taken-for-granted practices in education. Individuals who have graduated from these programs, who have internalized and taken up a more politicized identity, work to challenge perceptions about disability and special education within today’s schools. DSE provides teachers with a framework for resistance.

By coming to know disability from a DSE perspective, I found a language to understand disability and special education within a socio-cultural framework. I began to question what had been presented to me as common sense and wondered how these notions about disability could be altered for teachers entering the field. To begin to answer these questions, I initially examined how student teachers who were enrolled in a clinically rich secondary special education master’s program made sense of their placements after being exposed to the foundational knowledges of DSE within two university courses. Many of my participants expressed discontent with how inclusion had materialized within their school sites and how particular students were marginalized because of behavior and perceived ability. This prompted many of them to find nuanced ways to enact their developing DSE identities within those schools, identifying practices that were framed by scholarship in DSE and inclusion education were most beneficial for their students. Yet others, despite having some conceptualization of how exclusionary practices marginalized and oppressed particular students, positioned segregation as simply the reality of schooling. These findings prompted me to consider and investigate how teacher identity was formed and constantly negotiated. I wanted the opportunity to think more deeply about how programs like my own teacher education program worked
to situate inservice and preservice teachers to resist practices that had become embedded within schools. Given my initial struggles and the struggles common to many student teachers, I became curious about how other teachers who had been educated utilizing a DSE framework approached and responded to special education within their lives and in their teaching, particularly under current increased pressures of the standards and accountability-based reform movement.

**Statement of the Problem**

There is no doubt that the current institutionalized educational culture of accountability and standardization has impacted how teachers negotiate and make sense of their teaching identities (Ravich, 2013; Schneidewind, 2012). Dictates of accountability and standardization influence many of the ways in which schools operate, even on a daily basis, including choices of curriculum, focus on testing, and methods of instruction. As Schneidewind (2012) points out, accountability reforms have “undercut the personal and professional knowledge of educators and force teachers to implement curriculum and employ pedagogy that may directly contradict their own understanding and beliefs about education and the students they teach” (p. 10). Often, the market-driven atmosphere of schooling makes it impossible to “envision the potential for effective innovation” (Harvey-Koelpin, 2006, p. 142). In this way, teachers’ opportunities to enact their pedagogical beliefs and teaching identity are threatened, especially for teachers working in schools that have been deemed unsuccessful and not making progress toward the stated goals of the current reform initiatives.

Furthermore, within the current educational reform movement, it has become difficult for schools and educators to envision student difference as an asset that
contributes to the overall value of the school (Sapon & Schneidewind, 2012). Diversity, therefore, becomes situated as an obstacle to overcome—positioning the inclusion of students with disabilities as a barrier to the performance of teachers and schools. Even though accountability and standardization overall have led to increased expectations and higher standards, it has undermined “the inclusive belief in differences as resources” (Curcic et al., 2011, p. 121). Because of the fear regarding the consequences associated with disability and the linking of teacher performance ratings to student test scores, both general and special education teachers have become fearful of punitive repercussions if their students are not making “appropriate” progress, further institutionalizing a narrowing of the curriculum and the exclusion of students who are perceived as unable (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Hartael, & Rothstein, 2012). Schooling practices that contribute to deficit discourses around difference are those same practices that teachers must actively navigate and negotiate daily in their schools and classrooms. Within these constraints, teachers may begin to further marginalize students and divest from finding ways to ensure all students are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate within the regular education classroom.

By introducing preservice and inservice teachers to a DSE framework, teacher education programs and institutions provide educators with the theoretical and pedagogical tools to engage in ongoing critical analysis and reflection pertaining to disability that demands they seek out alternatives to understanding and practicing taken for granted constructions of disability inherent within special education and schooling (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Oyler, 2011). After querying recent graduates from across the United States about the impact of DSE pedagogy on their practices,
Broderick, Reid, & Valle (2008) reported that DSE pedagogy, “shape[s] the ways in which they [recent graduates] frame and understand their own students, enabling them to ‘think about’ not only their students but also their ‘perception of ability/disability’ and ideas about ‘normalcy,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘social justice’” (p. 146). A DSE framework, thus, “may provide pathways that can assist teacher educators to develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and dispositions to address inequities in American education” (Landorf, Rocco, & Nevin, 2007, p. 44). At this critical juncture where disability and teacher education meet, DSE may therefore provide teachers with language and tools to question and subvert practices that are seen as central to the accountability and standards-based reform movement.

As an educator, I have to believe in the age-old saying (usually attributed to Francis Bacon) that knowledge is power. This understanding drives this study and indeed my own practice. By knowing and making meaning of disability through a DSE framework, we thrust educators into an ongoing critical analysis and reflection around disability that demands they to seek out alternatives to understanding and practicing taken-for-granted constructions of disability inherent within special education and schooling (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Oyler, 2011). Because identity is tied so closely to practices and beliefs systems, when teachers internalize a critical consciousness around disability, one would presume that they cannot ignore the stigmatizing and marginalizing aspects working in and through schooling. DSE can lead to transformative possibilities within schools when embedded within teacher education programming.
Although teachers are limited by a system that has placed its value in normalizing mechanisms through accountability standards, I sought to make visible the subversions that individuals enact daily to maintain a critical identity. When I began this study, my intent was to not only better understand the experiences of teachers who have come to know special education through a disability studies lens, but to generate possibilities that teachers could take up in order to resist the disabling practices inherent to special education that they encounter and to address the support systems that are necessary in order for them to retain teaching identities that are aligned with the tenets of DSE. By examining perceived small examples of “making do,” I aimed to engage with the multiple and varying levels of resistance taking place within schools by individual and collective teachers. Through an examination of the application of DSE within public schools, I sought to capture the everyday complexities teachers (and students) face, as well as to unearth culturally appropriate strategies that teachers entering the field might utilize to create sustainable change within their classrooms and schools. I contend that the tools critical educators use to actively maneuver and resist dominant discourses need to be made transparent and documented, as knowledge is only transferable when made available.

Therefore, in order to more fully understand the experiences and perspectives of individual educators who were educated within a disability studies-informed teacher education program and who continue to espouse a DSE identity, I employed a qualitative study that incorporated phenomenological interviewing to unearth how individual teachers who identify as DSE navigate today’s school systems (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Flick, 2007). I chose to utilize phenomenological interviewing, since phenomenology
works to specifically understand how individuals experience a particular phenomenon in a specific context and time (McPhail, 1995). Because the study is specifically focused on explicating the ways in which individuals take up and maintain these identities within schools, I chose to employ phenomenological interviewing by examining participants’ experiences within schools through in-depth semi-structured interviewing and document analysis to unearth participants’ negotiations to their belief systems within schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Trainor & Graue, 2013) and to explore the following:

1. How do teachers who have been educated within DSE framework resist dominant deficit discourses within schools? What are the negotiations and work these teachers do to maintain a disability studies in education aligned pedagogical practice?

2. How do the standards and accountability-driven alterations to the school environment, culture, and identity position teachers in relation to their DSE identities? In what situations do participants’ teaching identities become situated as malleable within today’s schooling contexts and environments?

Significance of the Study

I identify as a critical special educator. Therefore, I take a transformative stance and align my research work with movements centered on social justice, activism, access, and inclusion (Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Harris-Murri, 2008; Brantlinger, 1999; Connor, 2013). Within this frame of reference in this study, I sought to understand the experiences of individuals who self-identify, take up, and actively work to maintain a DSE identity within today’s schooling systems. Through the exploration of the lived experiences of similarly situated individuals, it is my hope that we can better understand
how critically conscious individuals negotiate their identities within the ever-evolving, often contradictory, and inherently complex system of schooling.

Although Broderick et al. (2011) explored the dynamics of teachers’ pedagogical grounding in DSE upon entering the field, more work is needed to account for the experiences of teachers transgressing the current educational environment and context. There is very little research that describes how a DSE identity explicitly manifests itself within today’s school. Broderick et al.’s discussion focused solely on how her participants made sense of their DSE identities in relation to the current school environment, not on how those identities were asserted within participants’ daily lives. In order to fill that research-to-praxis gap, the study exposes the explicit practices and pedagogy that educators practicing in K-12 schools take up in relation to and name as a DSE. Consequently, in order to attend to these research questions, I engaged deeply in understanding the experiences and perspectives of my participants. This included dialogue about the methods and strategies by which these teachers sustain their DSE identities, while working within school systems that have institutionalized both the accountability and standards-based reform movement, as well as teacher accountability systems that are often seen at odds with progress and critical approaches. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to engage with the negotiations and navigations that teachers who have been exposed to and identify with DSE make daily within their schools, classrooms, and communities to enact that critical identity. I hope that by exposing the continued labor of teachers working within these environments, in which they forge relationships with other teachers, parents, students, and families to improve the lives and future
opportunities of their students, we can support the continued induction of critically conscious educators into the field.

Specifically, the study focused on how teachers who have been educated within DSE pedagogy resist dominant discourses within schools. I focus particularly on teachers who have sought out and worked to maintain a DSE ideology through resistant practices (e.g. through student advocacy, curricular transformation, and more) against the backdrop of the current reform movement within schools. Even further, there have been relatively no studies that have focused on the pedagogy and praxis that educators who identify as DSE actually take up within today’s public schools. By exposing and connecting the experiences of educators who espouse a DSE identity, we may begin to provide teacher educators and teachers more substantive support and tools to maintain these identities, along with more salient opportunities to begin to plot lines of resistance to empower teachers entering a tumultuous field.

Description and Organization of the Study

This study explored the experiences and perspectives of eleven classroom teachers who self-identify and commit to disability studies in their practices and who are currently teaching in public schools. The study uncovered the lived experience of what it means to take on a disability studies identity, including the particular pedagogical methods and strategies that these teachers assigned to and named as disability studies. Through phenomenological interviewing, these eleven teachers’ experiences around practicing their identities were recorded and analyzed. The data collected offers a glimpse into how a disability studies identity manifests itself within today’s schools, including the complicated and complex personal experiences working within, along with talking back
to and reframing the system (of special education and public education). Overall, the study describes the interplay between the meanings that participants confer to their individual ideological commitments, along with the heightened demands of normative performance that the standards and accountability-based reform has established within today’s schools. In particular, the study focuses on the small and nuanced ways participants have taken up critical practices in order to maintain a DSE identity within their schools and classrooms. The study explores the contradictory positions and terms participants must navigate in order to maintain their fidelity to their critical identities (and to themselves). Their experiences converged and diverged at various points and their stories were both heartbreaking and heartwarming. Overall, however, they represent the continued labor that critical educators must engage in to maintain a positive sense of themselves and enact their pedagogical beliefs as educators.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One has outlined the overall context for research on teachers who espouse a disability studies identity within the current culture of public and special education. Chapter Two reviews relevant scholarship that informs the study, which includes research on the impact and underlying implications of standards and accountability-based reform, teacher identity and resistance, and finally, underlying tenets and beliefs of disability studies in education. Chapter Three explicates how I chose to take up and study the phenomenon, including the reasoning behind particular procedures and methods of data collection and analysis. Chapters Four, Five, and Six outline the key findings of the study. Chapter Four discusses the manner in which participants’ DSE identity manifested within their classrooms and with their students. Chapter Five explores the continued labor and negotiations that
participants exerted within their schools and with colleagues and parents in order to enact their DSE identity within the context of the standards and accountability-based reform movement. The chapter highlights the tactical maneuvers that the teachers chose to enact with students, colleagues, and parents at the individual, classroom, and institutional level. Chapter Six focuses on the maintenance work of participants, including the overall networks of support that they drew on in order to preserve their critical commitments. It also covers the personal struggles educators discussed centered on persisting within the field when taking up their commitments and belief systems. The final chapter summarizes these findings in relation to the research questions, discusses limitations, and proposes implications for policy, as well as pre-service, and continuing teacher education.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study I sought to understand how teachers negotiate a disability studies identity within the increased pressures of the standards and accountability based reform movement. Since these research questions converge and intersect across multiple points, a broad review of literature that covers a swath of fields is necessary to organize the ideas and theories that impact and influence the study. Given that much of teachers’ pedagogy and practice has become mediated by accountability and standardization measures, within the first section of the literature review, I examine and analyze the implications and assumptions underlying the educational reform agenda on the current educational culture. Because the study focuses on disability in relation to working within systems of special education, I then demonstrate the impact and consequences the current reform agenda has had on special education. The second large section of the chapter explores literature on teacher identity theories, including what factors impact teachers’ adoption of and internalization of professional identity. In order to more fully conceptualize teacher identity theories, I then explore literature that addresses the impact of teacher and teacher candidates K-12 and post-secondary schooling experiences on teaching identity development and maintenance. Finally, since this study explores the experiences of teachers whom espouse a DSE pedagogical stance and since many of the ways in which DSE conceptualizes schooling and special education go against “commonsense” conceptions of disability, I highlight literature that points to the methods and strategies that teachers embrace to subvert systems in order to maintain a critical identity.
The third part of the chapter takes a look at the literature on the theoretical orientation of DSE. Since part of the participant selection criteria for this study was alignment with disability studies in education framework, it is important for the reader to understand the basic tenets of DSE. Moreover, it is imperative that the reader grasp the assumptions that underlie teaching under a theoretical orientation that is committed to and values DSE. Through this review of literature related to the study, including the current educational culture, teaching identity and resistance, I hope to illuminate the overall significance of the study in relation to research on teachers, disability studies in education, and special education.

**Assumptions and consequences underlying standardization and accountability**

The work of teachers continues to be mediated by a reform agenda that has been dictated by market driven reformers and centers on standardization and accountability (Brown & Au, 2014; Ravich, 2013; Smyth, 2008; Voltz & Foore, 2006). Teachers have become positioned as both the central actors and perpetrators involved in occupying these reform initiatives. Although not contradictory to one another, the increased focus on accountability and standards based reform has forced many teachers to ignore their perceptions of “good” pedagogy in order to work toward and within the stated measures of reform (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Schneidewind, 2012). Many of these policy measures have worked to decrease teacher autonomy and disempower and deskill the profession of teaching (Au, 2011; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Schneidewind, 2012; Valli & Buese, 2007). Teachers, therefore, have developed distinct relationships to these national mechanisms of reform that continue to mediate their identities as teachers. In order to more fully understand the current reform culture, I
will examine the underlying assumptions of the agenda in relation to teaching and then dissect the consequences these initiatives have had on students with disabilities, specifically.

**The Reform Agenda.** The NCLB mandate was designed to simultaneously close the achievement gap and ensure that United States students were prepared to be competitive within a global marketplace (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Curcic, Gabel, Zeitlin, Cubaro-DiFatta & Glaner, 2011; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2006). Simply, the law was created to eliminate the marked disparities between the achievement status of white middle class students and other marginalized groups, including students of color, students living within poverty, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities. NCLB asserts that “to improve students’ academic performance, federal legislation has raised the expectations for the academic achievement of all students and called for clearer, firmer standards and accountability” (NCLB, 2001).

Although NCLB was one iteration of educational reform within the United States, the underlying logic of the law continues to inform our perceptions about school reform and current educational culture. NCLB, therefore, has instilled a limited understanding of the means necessary to enact meaningful change, constructing a restrained policy view of educational reform that focuses strictly on accountability and standardization (Means, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). The logic underlying NCLB has solidified the marketization of education through increased interventions from the federal government, including the Race to the Top (RTTT), a reauthorization of the ESEA (The Blueprint for Educational Reform) and the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
Under President Obama, RTTT took shape in 2009, as a rigorous grant competition in which individual states would receive funds based on their ability to adopt key reform strategies that were prioritized by the Obama administration, including increased measures of standardization and assessment (RTTT, 2009). In general, “states who [won] the competition grants receive[d] large amounts of money, much of which was earmarked for standards-based reform” (Bacon, 2013, p. 11). Two of the prioritized reform strategies included in RTTT were the implementation and adoption of the Common Core by individual states and the implementation of a standardized evaluation system for administrators and teachers. The Common Core State Standard Initiative (CCSS) was developed jointly by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, as a state-led effort to establish consistent expectations for student knowledge and skills across K-12 schools (Porter, McKawan, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). The CCSS “aim[s] to align instruction with this framework so that many more students than at present can meet requirements of college and career readiness” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 5). The CCSS is a reaction to the increased pressure for standardization across the United States that originally began under NCLB. The promise of funding led many states to adopt these reforms, sometimes at a rapid pace and without proper preparation.

One of the most troubling aspects of the CCSS was its rushed adoption, implementation, and assessment in New York State. In New York, the CCSS curriculum modules (EngageNY) were rolled out at a quick pace with little to no educator input. The modules were made available to teachers weeks or days before they were supposed to teach them, and with little or no time spent on professional development for teachers
(Hess & McShane, 2013; Newmann & Grambell, 2013). At the same time, students were beginning to be assessed on the new curriculum. In many instances, the common core tests were being administered before students were taught the material and were being utilized to place students within remedial classes (Strauss, 2013). It seems as though in order to receive funding and meet guidelines associated with RTTT and CCSS, New York rushed its implementation and did not follow what educators would deem as best practices (Ujifiza, 2014). Although these procedures are not a function of CCSS, there has been a stream of backlash centered on CCSS from teachers, parents and students about the consequences of a poor and ill-planned implementation (Ujifiza, 2014). Even more, the same heavy-handed, top-down policies that forced adoption of the standards required use of the Common Core tests to evaluate educators.

Under RTTT, states and districts began to develop and implement teacher evaluation systems. The mandate specifically asked for these systems of teacher and administrator accountability to “assess teacher and principal effectiveness based on student academic growth and other measures, such as observation of professional practice” (U.S. Accountability Office, 2013, p. 1). In order to be considered competitive within the RTTT grant competition, therefore, teacher evaluation must have been designed using student growth as a key aspect of evaluation, it must also have defined how the model played a significant role in teacher evaluation (RTTT, 2009, p. 2). This framework for teacher evaluation falls under a value-added model and works to further progress the prevailing presumption that student test scores can effectively measure student and teacher effectiveness. These models of teacher evaluation seek to capture
diagnostically the value a teacher adds to student learning from one year to the next (Amrein-Beardsley, Collins, Polasky, & Sloak, 2013).

**Accountability systems as a means for remedying differences.** Approaches to closing the achievement gap embedded within NCLB (and its current iterations) include accountability systems that make visible the differences between achievement of specific subgroups (Peters & Oliver, 2009). NCLB created the context in which educational systems must begin to examine equity, not only in the provision of educational opportunities, but also in terms of educational outcomes. Under this policy logic, by focusing on the disproportional achievement rates of students of color, students with disabilities, and students with low socioeconomic status, students’ progress on grade level proficiencies would expose gaps, which could then be remedied (Apple, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Forte, 2010). For students with disabilities in particular, NCLB created an accountability system directly in relation to the capacity of students, teachers, and schools to improve all students’ achievement.

The vehicle utilized to measure and expose these gaps was, and continues to be, high stakes testing. These tests are considered high stakes because their results are used to make significant and consequential educational decisions about schools, teachers, administrators, and students (Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner & Rideau, 2010). Under the law, in order to receive funding, states are required to test students in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3-8 and once in grades 10-12 (Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly 2007; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007). In order to be eligible for the NCLB waiver, under RTTT states had to retain accountability systems that would be utilized to measure student growth and
teacher performance (King, 2013). At this moment in history, high stakes testing remains one of the central vehicles for accountability within RTTT and CCSS. Even more, these measures solidify accountability measures as both valid and reliable markers of progress, making accountability synonymous with high stakes testing (Au, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Koyoma, 2012; Ravich, 2013).

The current accountability system, therefore, has created an environment where product is more valued than process. It also built on the assumption that achievement is synonymous with effectiveness (Forte, 2010). These approaches of accountability instill a belief that these singular measures are both valid and objective indicators of schools, teachers, and students’ progress. Even though the design of these tests have some aspects of local input, they have been persistently developed in ways that are neither universally designed nor accessible to all (McGlaughlin, 2010; Weigart, 2012). Performance on these accountability tests, in its current form is narrowly defined. Educational researchers continue to state that the current system of standards and accountability “does not acknowledge or value that there are multiple views of participating in, or contributing to, society or of demonstrating one's competence” (Peters & Oliver, 2009, p. 553). Thus, through its administration of these reforms, “the U.S. Department of Education barely acknowledges this human variability” (Rothstein et al., 2006, p. 18). Nonetheless, the law posits the standard as achievable and valid as a method of determining proficiency and performance. Even more as Au (2011) asserts:

Hence, standardization, in order to maintain a claim to objectivity, has to assume that local, individual conditions and local, individual factors make no difference in either student performance or test-based measurement. Indeed, the assumed
validity of objective measurement provided by standardized tests rests upon this denial of individual differences (p. 37).

Yet no test can be truly or fully objective (Albritten, Mainzer, & Zieglar, 2004; Rothstein et al., 2006). Furthermore, as educational literature points to again and again, most standards and assessments that have been developed under the standards and accountability reform movement privilege a certain kind of knowledge, one based on white middle class values (Artiles, 2011; Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Leonardo, 2007; Nieto, 2005).

**Teacher evaluation nested within reform.** As mentioned earlier, the provisions for receiving funding under RTTT included developing a meaningful evaluation system for teachers and school leaders. Results from standardized test mechanisms are now mandated in many states for measuring teacher effectiveness, reifying perceptions that student achievement is synonymous with teacher effectiveness (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Harvey-Koeplin, 2006; Schneidewind, 2012; Valle & Connor, 2011). For example, in New York State, through the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) teachers have begun to be evaluated on a 100-point scale, with 60 points based on observations of practice (lesson observations, lesson plans, a portfolio) and 40 points based on student growth and performance (20 points based on the NYS tests and 20 pointed based on district determined assessments). In the NYS Regents Reform Agenda Plan, John King, the former NYS commissioner of education, explicitly calls for the measurement of student growth as a significant factor in identifying effective teachers (King, 2012). Recently, Governor Andrew Cuomo called for a considerable increase in the weight and utilization of standardized test scores in measuring the effectiveness of teachers (Cuomo,
2015). The focus on and utilization of accountability testing in measuring teacher effectiveness is a growing trend. Of the fifty states, “forty-six states require or recommend that evaluations include measures on how teachers impact their students’ achievement” (Center for Public Education, 2013). Teacher effectiveness has, therefore, increasingly been reduced to student outcomes on tests as a result of the standards and accountability based reform.

These accountability systems continue to position teachers within neoliberal systems, where market driven logic drives teachers to perform. Within the current valued added logic, when teachers start doing their job more effectively (as if they are not doing it already), the product, i.e. students, will begin to perform better, leading toward more equity within schools (Apple, 2007; Connell, 2009). To further incentivize teachers, they are offered merit pay for reaching a highly effective status. In contrast, if teachers are deemed ineffective, they may be threatened with a loss of their job (Koyoma, 2012; Means, 2011; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Schneidewind, 2012). In this view:

No attention is given to the processes of teaching and learning involved in obtaining such outcomes. Instead, a system of punishment functions to control and regulate those schools, teachers, and students who are considered ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’ in meeting pre-established standards for what counts as learning (Peters & Oliver, 2009, p. 273).

Under these presumptions, by either “reward[ing] or punish[ing] teachers on the basis of how much students learn, teachers will do better and students will learn more” (Schneidewind, 2012, p. 15). No single teacher accounts for all of a student’s learning. Prior teachers have lasting effects, for good or ill, on students’ later learning, and current
teachers also interact to produce students’ knowledge and skills. (Darling-Hammond, Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2011). The current methods in which teachers are being evaluated continue to position teachers as the sole individuals to change the underlying issues of inequity and performance within the US Education system.

One of the persistent claims of educational reformers who are part of these movements is that market based educational reforms are leading the civil rights issue of our time, in which we are saving kids who have been failed by ineffective teachers and low expectations (Ravich, 2013; Voltz & Fore, 2006). Reformers continue to cite the three years rule (having either a highly effective or ineffective teacher for three years) could alter student life trajectory. For example Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of District of Columbia schools and public face of the reform movement, has been cited saying “we know for poor minority children, if they have three highly effective teachers in a row, versus three ineffective teachers in a row, it can literally change their life trajectory” (Rhee, 2011 as cited by Ravich, 2013, p. 101). Similarly, Arne Duncan, the outgoing Secretary of Education has been cited as stating similar understandings of the impact that highly effective teachers can make, compared with those deemed as ineffective (Ravich, 2013). These apparent gains in learning from highly effective teachers provide the foundation for the mandates emphasis, in which discourses of academic achievement are tied directly to teachers and principals. The underlying logics and provisions, therefore, function to make the relationship between teacher quality and student test scores appear directly correlated and erases the possibility of other factors at work. One would assume that since this legislation has a “widespread consensus” that quality teachers are important, that it would be logically followed by a “pouring [of] vast
resources into teacher education,” but rather it insists on further testing and regulating teachers (Connell, 2009, p. 214). Nonetheless, this is not the case. The current logic of accountability and evaluation further misappropriates the deep wounds of inequity of schooling through the complete disregard of the variable resource allocation, increased poverty, and increased segregation ever present within the United States Education system (Ravich, 2013).

**Special Education and reform.** Special education has remained a focal point of the reform movement. Although NCLB focused on the racial and economic achievement gap, it additionally implicated discrepancies between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Albritten et al., 2004; McGlaughlin & Thurlow, 2003; Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002; Thurlow, Lazurus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005). Repeatedly, researchers have shown that special education students still lag behind their nondisabled peers in educational achievement (Albritten et al., 2004; Wei, 2012), are often held to lower expectations, are less likely to take the full academic curriculum in high school (Eckes & Swando, 2006), and are more likely to drop out of school (Aron & Loprest, 2012). For students with disabilities, beginning with the passage of NCLB, a large majority (more than 97%) of students with disabilities were legislatively mandated to be included within state wide assessments (NCLB, 2001) because of the logical “recognition that exclusion from assessment may lead to exclusion from consideration in important decisions that are made at the school level” (Decker & Bolt, 2008, p. 49). Therefore, to further align with the underlying goals of the educational reform movement, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was amended to fit with and meet the goals of NCLB.
Since its enactment the IDEIA has provided the right to public education for students with disabilities within the United States. The law was developed as civil rights legislation to ensure no student could be denied access to public schooling. The IDEIA has been revised numerous times since its initial passage in 1976 to reflect the changing needs of students and schools, including the standards and accountability based reform. In order to further align itself with NCLB, IDEIA (2004) was revised. IDEIA (2004) calls for, “all children with disabilities are [to be] included in all general State and district wide assessment programs… with appropriate accommodations, where necessary and as indicated in their respective individuals education plans” [Section 1412 (c) (16) (A)]. It also allowed for a certain percentage of students with disabilities to receive an alternative assessment (Bouck, 2009; Bouck, 2010; Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Wakeman et al., 2007). By situating special education within a unified system of accountability testing, and by disaggregating their performance, NCLB, and its current iterations, has had an immense impact on how special education students have been, and continue to be, serviced within schools.

The effects of market-based reform on disability and inclusion. The participation and performance criteria as outlined by NCLB encouraged many schools and districts to “rethink” how they were servicing their students with disabilities. The mandate, therefore, promoted an increased focus on students with disabilities and their academic progress (or perceived lack thereof). Schools and districts responded to the requirement of nearly one hundred percent participation of students with disabilities in grade level accountability testing in numerous ways; including pushing students out of school (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Hardman & Dawson, 2008);
blaming students and teachers for failure to meet performance markers (Albritten et al., 2004; Artiles, 2011; Curci et al., 2012); separating students into more restrictive environments based on behavior and cognitive ability (Agran et al., 2002; Albritten et al., 2004; Bouck, 2009; Wakeman et al., 2007); and, in many instances, including more students within general education curriculum and classes (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hardman & Dawson, 2008; McGlaughlin, 2010).

In some ways these reforms marked increased access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities; however, the methods for achieving access varied based on the perceived capabilities of students to adjust to and earn their way into the regular education classrooms (Curcic et al., 2011; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Hehir & Katzman; 2011). For example, although one would assume that access to general education content would happen within the general education classroom, many districts and schools decided to provide access to the curriculum within more restricted self-contained settings (Bacon, 2013; Bacon, Rood, & Ferri, forthcoming). After students with disabilities were required to be counted toward participation under NCLB and RTTT, the emergence of a new track of self-contained classes were designed to provide students with disabilities access to standards-based general education curriculum, but in a segregated class (Bacon et al., forthcoming). Nonetheless, policies mandatory under the standards and accountability based reform have both promoted and inhibited the development of effective inclusive schools and classrooms.

In some ways NCLB has shifted the focus of special education away from a functional or life skills curriculum, toward points of access to the general education content and curriculum (including the CCSS). This is most likely due to both NCLB’s
explicit and logical linkage between participating within high stakes testing focused on grade level proficiencies and the need for students with disabilities to be exposed to and have access to the curriculum upon which they would be tested (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Kortering & Christenson, 2009; McGlaughlin, 2010). A number of studies have reported increased access to the general education curriculum that were necessitated because of alignment between standards and large-scale assessments (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Christenson et al., 2007; Defur, 2002; Voltz & Fore, 2006). As Voltz & Fore (2006) argue:

[It] helps to draw attention to the needs of these students [identified with disabilities]. This provides the visibility needed to attract the resources that are required to address deficit areas that may emerge. Urban special educators, then, must be ready to advocate for the things that matter most in enhancing the academic achievement of our students. Although standards and assessments alone cannot do this, they may serve as an impetus to promote the kinds of changes that would make a difference (p. 332).

As such, as these researchers forecasted, these mandates have created an avenue for increased access to general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Despite serving as the impetus for access, “the establishment of high standards and the implementation of accountability measures may be necessary, but it is certainly not sufficient. Probably the biggest single fault of the standards movement lies not so much in what it does, but in what it leaves undone” (Voltz & Fore, 2006, p. 334). Thus, although the accountability and standards-based era brought about positive changes for students with disabilities, including increased attention on the performance of students
with disabilities, exposure to a more rigorous set of expectations, and in some instances, fostering more students’ admissions into general education classes, it does not work to address many of the underlying issues that continue to afflict educational equity (Agran et al., 2002; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Wakeman et al., 2007).

Although NCLB has resulted in increased points of access for students with disabilities, with the curriculum and in general education, some scholars have argued that the overreliance and hyper focus on testing has taken away from the individualization implicit within special education servicing (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; McLaughlin, Micheli, & Hoffman, 2009; Wakeman et al., 2007; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). On one hand, students are accessing general education curriculum, but on the other hand we might ask at what cost? Many researchers argue that the focus on standardization has led to decreased attention on individual student needs, including less focus on the acquisition of daily life skills, including self-determination (Agran et al., 2002; Bouck, 2009; Bouck, 2013; Lombardi, Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2012), and the development of meaningful and thoughtful individualized education plans (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hardman & Dawson, 2008). Particularly, there has been an increased focus on developing standards-based IEPs (McGlaughlin, 2010; McGlaughlin et al., 2009; Voltz & Fore, 2006). As such, there has been a significant shift away from individually determined goals and objectives, toward goals and objectives aligned with general education instruction and curriculum (McGlaughlin et al., 2009). Although in some ways the standards-based IEP may provide increased points of access to inclusion and general education content because goals are grounded in the general education curriculum, it may be limiting to some students and their individual support needs.
**Increased pressure and focus on testing, assessment, and performance.** The standards and accountability based reform has forced many teachers to ignore their perceptions of “good” pedagogy, because of the substantial amount of pressure put on them by their districts and schools for students to perform on tests (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Schneidewind, 2012; Valli & Buese, 2007). In particular, standards based reform has been promoted teaching as a set of “ritualized, mechanical, linear, and de-contextualized thinking and controlled responses, rather than the creative reasoning and critical debate that are the sine qua non of democracies” (Bejoian & Reid, 2005, p. 225). The standards and accountability-based reforms have thus led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Au, 2011; Koyoma, 2012; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). For example, a study of 2,686 teacher responding to a survey about current educational instructional trends under standards based reform overwhelmingly reported that there was an increased focus on test preparation within classrooms, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum (Christenson et al., 2007). Teachers, administrators, and schools that have been labeled as lower performing often feel the pressure to work solely toward achieving proficiency, which has become translated as teaching to the test (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Smyth, 2008).

The failure of particular subgroups, including students with disabilities, to meet proficiencies has led to an increased culture of blaming that has further marginalized individuals identified with disabilities (Artiles, 2011; Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011; Curci et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2006). To counteract the students discrepancies in meeting the stated performance objectives, numerous tactics have been employed to ensure that these students are either not part of the testing
equation or placed within remedial classes or settings. Tactics for “gaming the system” include pushing students into GED or alternative programs (Decker & Bolt, 2008; Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Kortering & Christenson, 2009; Eckes & Swando, 2009; Pyle & Wexler, 2011); retaining students (Albritten et al., 2004; Thurlow et al., 2002; Voltz & Fore, 2006); having students stay home on testing days (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker, 2008); paying more attention to students who are more likely to have a proficient score and ignoring others (Koyoma, 2012; Valli & Buese, 2007); and increasing the tracking of students (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2012; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). These methods of “gaming the system” are fueled by a resource allocation logic, in which students with disabilities, or students whom are perceived more likely to not meet proficiency, are often positioned as taking away from students whom may actually benefit from or be able to reach performance objectives (Apple, 2004; Curcic et al., 2012; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006). These beliefs have reinforced a misunderstanding of inclusion as only admitting students to general education if they are able to meet certain criteria, not as a means to foster meaningful participation with differentiated and universally designed instruction to meet the needs of all students. For example, “within the current high-stakes testing environment, teachers’ willingness to accept students with disabilities became conditional based on the amount of time that would be required to address their particular needs” (Harvey-Koelpin, 2006, p. 139). Although neither of these aspects of the accountability and standards based reform movement are a function of inclusive education, the focus on performance has created a culture where inclusive practices have, in many instances, been “conveniently” dropped in or not developed and executed in meaningful ways, leaving many children
with disabilities blamed for not being able to meet norm referenced objectives. These tendencies are contradictory to the purposes of the reform movement’s logic of rendering these students more visible and providing increased support to help narrow the achievement gap.

*Options for those who do not perform well: Dropping out and retention.* Some critics have suggested that high stakes testing has resulted in students with disabilities being systematically pushed out as a result of schools’ responses to the policies of reform. Because schools often tie grade level promotion and graduation directly to high stakes testing, students who fail to perform either face retention (Albritten et al., 2004; Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007; Christenson et al., 2007) or an option to graduate with a certificate that is perceived as less rigorous than a diploma (Gaumer-Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & McGlaughlin, 2007; McGlaughlin, 2010; Zhang, Katsiyannas, & Kortering, 2007). These consequences, particularly for urban high school students, have been shown to increase student drop-out rates. In both instances, dropping out and the increased issuing of alternative certificates of attendance are linked to students having difficulty finding post-school success (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Hardman & Dawson, 2008). Research also suggests that high-stakes assessments are more likely to undermine the motivation of students already struggling, as tests are often seen as insurmountable barriers and students perceive dropping out as one of the only viable options (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). As Kortering & Christenson (2009) found, “nearly 800 students with disabilities, the vast majority of those representing high-incidence conditions, leave high school as an official dropout every single day” (p. 5). Consequences for students who fail to graduate from high school
are devastating, including underemployment, unemployment, and incarceration (Artiles, 2011; Kortering & Christianson, 2012; Schneidewind, 2012).

**Exclusion.** Not only has the mandated accountability testing limited the scope of what is taught and pushed students out who are unable to reach these proficiencies, it has also perpetuated the exclusion of students who are perceived as unable to perform successfully on the accountability testing because of either cognitive ability or behavioral problems (Agran et al., 2002; Albritten et al., 2004; Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Bouck, 2009; Curcic et al., 2011; Eckes & Swando, 2009; Wakeman et al., 2007; Weigart, 2012). There is a twofold logic to placing students in restrictive settings. First, students are seen as taking too much of the teacher’s already limited resources within the general education classroom (Curcic et al., 2012; Liasidou, 2013). Second, students may take away from students who are able to perform adequately on proficiency tests (Apple, 2004; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006). Either way, instead of providing access to the general education curriculum within the regular education classroom, many students with these labels continue to be shuffled into and serviced within self-contained classrooms (Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2012; Lombardi et al., 2012; Zion & Blanchett, 2011) and/or tracked into remedial courses (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Koyoma, 2012; Peters & Oliver, 2009).

Two provisions that solidify and perpetuate segregated spaces as viable option are the Zero-tolerance policies (NCLB, 2001) and the allowance of 3% of students who can participate in alternative assessment (NCLB, 2001). The alternative assessment provision served as a means to circumvent, rather than create, more inclusive opportunities for students deemed to have the most “severe” or “complex” disabilities. In particular, the
3% allowance of the alternative assessment (AA) has reaffirmed segregated settings as the most appropriate place for servicing these students’ needs, based on the perceived capabilities and competencies (Agran et al., 2002; Albritten et al., 2004; Eckes & Swando, 2009; Wakeman et al., 2007; Weigart, 2012). For example, Agran et al. (2002) found that teachers did not consider access to the general curriculum important for students with severe disabilities, but instead ranked functional and social skills as most important. Thus, schools and districts have resisted including these students within accountability testing relying on AA instead, as “stakeholders within special education disagree on the benefit of standards-based reform” (Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007, p. 147). Although I would agree that accountability testing in its current form may not be a viable option for all students, the use and option of alternative assessments leads to the permissible exclusion of students from meaningful access to general education (Bacon, 2013; Wakeman et al., 2007). But through a re-imagination of what accountability is and means, we can make headway toward inclusive and universally designed assessments that honor the strengths and proficiencies of all students (McGlaughlin, 2010; Thompson, Thurlow, & Malouf, 2004). Contrary to this understanding, segregation has remained the prevailing service provision for students identified with intellectual, developmental, and multiple disabilities, with almost three-fourths (73.2%) of students with cognitive disabilities served within a separate space - the highest of any disability category (Curcic et al., 2012). Similarly, but not to such a large extent, almost one-third (31.4%) of students identified with emotional disabilities received special education services in a separate educational facilities in 2007 (Curcic et al., 2012). Although the number of students receiving services within separate
educational facilities has decreased since this study to about twenty percent (20.3%) of students with emotional disabilities nationwide being educated less than 40% of their day within the regular education classroom (National report to Congress on the IDEA, 2014).

Students identified as having emotional behavioral disabilities experience general educational instruction to a lesser degree than youth with disabilities as a whole. On average, 16% take all of their courses in special education settings (compared with 9% of youth with disabilities as a whole who take only special education courses). Many also attend alternative schools, which are generally designed to serve students placed at risk of school failure due to circumstance or ability (e.g., behind in credits, suspended, pregnant or parenting). In addition to these settings, a high proportion of youth who are incarcerated have disabilities (Gaylord, Lehr & McComas, 2005). Even with these statistics in mind, few research studies discuss the permissible exclusion of students whom engage within “persistently disruptive behavior” (NCLB, 2002; see Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2012). I could only find two studies making an explicit connection (Bejoian & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2012), but my own experiences within schools and with teachers has demonstrated that students labeled with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities are often serviced within segregated settings because of the belief that they cannot be appropriately included within regular education and will take away from other students learning. The language surrounding the zero-tolerance provision strengthens that discourse. As Bejoian & Reid (2005) state, “teachers are empowered to remove violent or persistently disruptive students from the classroom. However, there is neither a description of what is to be considered ‘disruptive’ nor are the acceptable and appropriate ways of being and behaving delineated” (p. 227).
Overwhelmingly, students of color are overrepresented in remedial and segregated spaces (Artiles, 2011; Connor & Ferri, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005; McGlaughlin, 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006). Research has documented that individuals of color (particularly African American and Latino males) are subject to increased exclusion and increased placement in segregated classes and/or through tracking (Artiles, Kozleski, Ortiz, Osher, & Trent, 2010; Cosier & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). For example, individuals of minority status labeled with mild intellectual disabilities were three times more likely to be educated in segregated settings than students identified as non-Hispanic or Caucasian (Artiles & Trent, 1994). The surfeit of academic, social and lifelong consequences associated with placement within segregated classes including (but not limited to) decreased expectations, increased time off academic tasks, exclusion and restraint, and decreased opportunities for post-secondary access, further marginalize these individuals (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011).

The overwhelmingly damaging consequences of the top down standards and accountability reform movement on students with disabilities has led the increased stigmatization of students with disabilities with little to no improvement on instruction and learning (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker & Bolt, 2008; Forte, 2010; Voltz & Fore, 2006). Outcomes for minority students, ELL students, and students living in poverty mirror these trends. There is a clear misunderstanding of the underlying issues that continue to leave many of these students behind (Ravich, 2013).

**Standardization without resources.** At the forefront of these reform movements is a confusion between measuring schools and fixing schools (and an implication that schools are broken). The current mechanisms for reform focus little attention on
“institutional and structural barriers that impede educational equality” (Nieto, 2005, p. 61) and provide little to no resources to struggling districts. Poignantly, as Ravich (2013) states:

Our urban schools are in trouble because of concentrated poverty and racial segregation… the solutions proposed by the self-proclaimed reformers have not worked as promised. They have failed even by their own most highly valued measure, which is test scores. At the same time, the reformers’ solutions have had a destructive impact on education as a whole (p. 4).

As Ravich pointed out, considering the underlying reasons for inequity within schooling is important and valuable for determining how to change schools. Nonetheless, throughout the federal educational reform movements, school and district level contextual differences (location, students taught, family background etc.) are not seen as vital aspects of contextualizing school reform. National reform movements manage schools outside of a local understanding and position education as occurring within a vacuum, whereas in reality individual schools and districts operate in relationship to locally-bound conditions, contexts, and milieus (Au, 2011; Forte, 2010; Peters & Oliver, 2009; Wong, 2013; Zheng et al., 2007).

As most educators would attest, context does matter. Hehir & Katzman (2011) assert “policy makers need to be able to implement policies differentially at the school level, taking into account the uniqueness of each school and its capacity to innovate” (p. 185). Nonetheless, a trend to position the contexts of individual schools and districts as irrelevant infiltrates many educational reform movements and pushes schools to conform, often with little to no time, and too often to unrealistic standards enforced through the
For example, although CCSS provides districts and states some aspects of local input, it does little to re-appropriate resources for implementation of the initiative to already struggling districts, most of which face severe poverty and dwindling resources. Current standards continue to be virtually impossible to meet without increased support, including instructional materials and resources, as well as professional development (Kober, 2011; Sawchuck, 2012). With little control over how money is dispersed within state districts, there is concern that the inequalities that currently plague our education system will continue to increase, leaving the poorest districts at an even more severe disadvantage (Brandt, 2012).

A rhetoric of teacher and student blaming and shaming has emerged that further demoralizes teachers and students working within schools deemed as failing without a close examination of the contexts in which these schools are operating. As Harvey-Koelpin (2006) asserts, “by focusing blame on the teachers, politicians draw attention away from the social, political, and economic policies they legislate, which effectively create and maintain the conditions of poverty in our society” (p. 129). Many of the fundamental assumptions on which the mandate operates to transform underperforming schools are problematic and, in many instances, have led to a further demoralization of schools, students, and teachers. For example, the vast number of students who have been deemed as not performing on grade level and in need of remediation continue to fall behind grade level curriculum within required remediated instruction classes and program (Apple, 2007; Leonardo, 2007). Schools that have been deemed as underperforming are placed under strict orders of reform that are often unrealistic and unreachable in the mandated time allotted (Forte, 2010). These reform efforts continue to place the onus of
change solely on individual educators and schools, leading to increased pressures on both educators and students to perform within limited means.

The adoption and implementation of a primarily top down system of reform has significantly altered the educational climate in the United States. Not only have the proponents of the educational reform positioned education within a neoliberal agenda, but in addition, it has further centered and stabilized educational practices within normalizing discourses. Within these mechanisms, the reform movement has both narrowed the curriculum and halted previous pedagogically beneficial and significant developments related to inclusive, constructivist, culturally relevant, and multicultural pedagogy (Au, 2011; Koyoma, 2012; Leonardo, 2007; Peters & Oliver, 2009; Sapon-Shevin & Schneidewind, 2012; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). The underlying assumptions of reform have constructed and established practices that further employ a deficit discourse around difference within schools. These provisions have thus had huge impacts on the ways in which we instruct and service students.

The political and ideological forces of the standards and accountability based reform have shaped the current United States educational framework, leading to a culture that preempts a strict and narrowing construction of education. Under the mandate, an understanding that quality education can only be accomplished through testing, monitoring, and punitive action has been established and undoubtedly mediates the daily work of teachers. The current educational environment has altered and continues to alter, what it means to be a teacher, influencing professional teacher identity development, and maintenance.

Research on teacher identity formation
Defining teacher identity. The formation and re-formation of teaching identity provides a framework through which teachers understand themselves in relation to who they are and why they practice what they practice. Foremost, “teachers identities are central to their beliefs, values and practices that guide their actions within and outside of the classroom” (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 459). Identity, therefore, provides individual teachers with a pedagogical compass. The compass is “something that teachers use to justify, explain, and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate” (MacLure, 1993, p. 9). Identity thus, is “not something teachers have, but something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers” (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 123). Therefore, “teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (Sachs, 2005, p. 15).

In general, the concept of identity continues to be defined in various ways in literature. Although identity is often perceived as something static and unwavering that is innate to the individual, an understanding of identity as a fixed entity undermines the complex nature of how individuals experience and relate to the world. In order to more accurately understand identity, we must move toward conceptualizing identity in ways that acknowledge that identity formation is based on the knowledges that are being made available and how individuals contextually interpret each knowledge. Therefore one’s identity only becomes part of who one is when the individual internalizes its significance within his or her life and constructs meaning around that internalization (Ball, 1999; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Halpin, Moore, Edwards, George, & Jones, 2000).
Identity, in particular teaching identity, is therefore externally driven, reflexive, and dynamic (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Gallagher, 2005; MacLure, 1993; Sutherland et al., 2010; Watson, 2006; Young, 2011a).

Much research has examined the role of professional teacher identity formation (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Dillabough, 1999; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Mawhinney & Xu, 1997; Samuel & Stephens, 2000; Sugrue, 1997). Just as any identity, teaching identity can be understood in relation to personal identity, wherein a teacher’s professional identity is developed as an ongoing process of interconnecting their personal and professional experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Teachers, therefore,

are both products of their social histories, and—through things like hope, desperation, imagining, and mindfulness—move themselves from one subjectivity to the next, from one facet of their identity to another, and can in some limited sense choose to act in certain ways considered by them to be coherent with their own self-understandings (Olsen, 2008, p. 24).

Thus teaching identity is intimately connected to each individual teacher and their histories. As MacLure (1993) states, the manner wherein a teacher takes up his or her social location is to “lay claim to an argument,” as a teacher’s identity transforms and is transformed by their personal and professional lives.

Teacher identity is tied deeply to teaching practice (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Teachers’ practices, therefore, are the active location of their identity, as their daily practice is guided by what they believe and how they have come to believe it as meaningful to the school and classroom that they are situated within. The relationship
between teacher identity and practice is therefore reciprocal, as teachers often become who they are by what they do and vice versa (Watson, 2006). Identity, therefore, becomes translated and reinterpreted through the work teachers do within their everyday classroom and school practices.

The reflexive nature of teaching identity is tied directly to what discourses are made available to teachers over the course of their lives. As such “teacher identity and knowledge are intricately interwoven” (Musanti & Pense, 2010, p. 87). As Sutherland et al. (2010) asserts, “an individual’s prior knowledge and beliefs act as a filter for interpretation of his/her experiences; thus the characteristics of, relationships among, and coherence of these sub identities will be unique to each individual” (p. 456). Hence, teachers’ continuous identity development is making sense of the ever-evolving system and structure that teachers inhabit. Teachers are constantly reframing their teacher identity in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Moore & Hoffman as cited by Beijaard et al., 2004). Therefore, “part of the experience of teaching is continually constructing a sustainable identity as a teacher” (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 714). For example, teachers may rationalize whether or not a specific knowledge attributes to or takes away from what they believe, choosing to either internalize that knowledge or disregard it. Experiences that mold teaching identity can include teachers own schooling autobiography, what they learn about teaching within teacher preparation programming including teaching placement(s), and how they experience teaching after starting their teaching career.

**Impact of teacher preparation on teaching identity.** Teacher preparation programs create platforms wherein various forms of knowledge are exchanged and
integrated into what pre-service teachers think about the products of teaching and their identities as teachers. These exposures either affirm or problematize how they see and envision themselves as teachers (Schepens, Aelterman, & Vlerick, 2009). At the forefront of teachers’ understanding of what teaching is, are teachers’ own K-12 experiences. As Britzman (2003) contends,

The overfamiliarity of the teaching profession is a significant contradiction affecting those learning to teach. We have all played a role opposite of teachers for a large part of our school lives. It is taken for granted that we all know what a teacher is and does. This knowledge is based upon years of observation. It must be remembered that by the time a person enters teacher education, she or he has spent approximately thirteen thousand hours observing teachers (p. 3).

Teachers’ understanding of what teaching is, what teachers are like, and what teachers do is therefore highly affected by their own schooling autobiography. Traditional notions of teaching influence how teachers’ perceive and socially locate themselves. Traditions then “provide some of the most significant symbolic materials for formation of identity, both at the individual and collective level” (Halpin et al., 2000, p. 138). Teachers “come to resemble things or conditions; their identity assumes an essentialist quality and, as such, socially constructed meanings become known as innate and natural” (Britzman, 2003, p. 5). Teachers often then become who their teachers were, re-instilling notions which maintain the static nature of schooling and societal status quo.

Traditional notions of what teaching is can stifle opportunities for thinking critically and questioning notions of schooling, therefore reaffirming traditional understandings of teaching. As Kumashiro (2009) notes, “traditionally, teacher education
programs have contributed to this problem by not significantly troubling the ways that dominating views and practices of ‘good’ teachers contribute to oppression and hinder anti-oppressive change” (p. 1). Accordingly, program pedagogy and philosophy often reflect the status quo, which tend to focus on course sequences that simply meet the teaching and learning standards of certification credentialing (Young, 2011a). As Gallagher (2005) asserts,

As it stands now, colleges of education tend to devote most of their efforts to credentialing and precious little to exposing undergraduate, or even graduate students to the philosophical and conceptual foundations of their own profession. Instead, most graduate with little or no serious inquiry into what their work is all about. More to the point they are seldom encouraged to immerse themselves deeply in the political, moral, and pedagogical critiques that might enable them to develop a decidedly sophisticated analysis to the challenges they confront as educators (p. 152).

As such, they do not question what has become constructed as schooling because as Kumashiro (2009) notes:

Perspectives, including perspectives that challenge common sense, are already dismissed as irrelevant, inconsequential, or inappropriate. After all, common sense does not tell us that this is what that this is what schools could be doing; it tells us that this and only this is what schools should be doing (p. xxv)

Traditional teacher education programs, therefore, reify how and what teaching is perceived as, endorsing such ideas as truth and maintaining traditionalism within the development of teaching identity. For example, most traditional education programs
separate education programs between general and special education, the programs have different requirements, meet in different buildings, and often have very little common coursework (Young, 2011b). Under this arrangement, disability or difference becomes positioned as a specific area of expertise, in which special educators gain critical professional skills that assist them in working with individuals with disabilities, while content or elementary generalists presume the inability to work with “those” kids. The divide between special and general education proliferates traditional notions of teaching by supporting “certain meanings about pupil difference in teacher education” (Young, 2011a, p. 492). Even though traditional teacher education programs reify certain prescriptive norms of teaching, they can be reconstructed to provide teacher education students with an experience that alters their perceptions about what teaching is (Young, 2011a; Young 2011b). Teacher education programs can be utilized as sites to subvert such commonsense notions and develop teachers who identify outside of traditional lines.

**Transformational possibilities of teacher preparation on identity.** Teacher education programs could be utilized as sites of transformation and acquisition of knowledges that encourage teachers to question and talk back to traditional practices within schooling. As such, a “responsibility lies with… those institutions of higher education which train them to develop a sense of purpose—recognition of a social mission that legitimates the teacher’s authentic identity” (Parkinson, 2008, p. 59). There is a responsibility to develop an authentic identity that is based on the social mission of troubling the current practices of schooling and who they benefit. Teacher education programs can begin to address this by developing their students’ critical consciousness, in which they offer teachers a new way of viewing, understanding and contextualizing
schooling and teaching. Critical consciousness focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of oppression that operate within the world (Freire, 2000). It positions individuals to question and critique what they have perceived as commonsense and for whom that commonsense privileges (Kumashiro, 2009). These exposed knowledges challenge pre-service teachers’ identities by “negotiating within shifting conceptions of what teaching is or should be,” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 185). Programs that engage in critically conscious pedagogical practices ask teacher education students to “analyze their assumptions that they have developed through their life experiences in schools, family life, with dominant culture, and with their own culture” (Oyler, 2011, p. 7). Foremost, a fundamental shift in teachers’ understanding of schooling “reconcile[s] long-held expectations with current teaching realities, and merge their personal self-understandings with their developing professional identities” (Olsen, 2008, p. 37). Therefore altering pre-service teachers traditionalist notions about teaching. Consequently, individual teachers become influenced and, often times, molded by an acquisition of knowledge that disrupts their understandings about the purposes of teaching.

Teacher education programs can disrupt commonsense by critically engaging with underlying systems of oppression (Routel, 2013; Zeichner, 2009). This includes, building a culture of critical self-reflection in order to uncover and challenge ablest assumptions that underlie stereotypes and discriminations. This focus on critical self-reflection and challenging assumptions at the individual level typically leads to a cognitive dissonance particularly in pre-service teachers, but
sometimes also in in-service teachers, between their established beliefs and new critical awareness (Peters & Reid, 2009, p. 556).

Moreover, teacher education programs that challenge commonsense notions of schooling and teaching provide teachers with a plurality of viewpoints that open up the possibilities for ideologies and practices that disrupt commonsense notions about the purpose and pedagogy of public schools (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Numerous programs employ a social justice critical consciousness raising stance within their undergraduate and graduate programs (see for example Ashby, 2012; Broderick et al., 2008; Broderick et al., 2011; Oyler, 2011; Peters & Reid, 2009; Zeichner, 2009). By employing methods that raise teacher’s critical consciousness, programs and schools mold their teacher identity to question, problematize, and resist discourses that have become known as commonsense and situated as normal within schools (Kumashiro, 2009; Peters & Reid, 2009; Sachs, 2003). But like all aspects of identity formation, “student teachers do not simply adopt what they learn during teacher education, they differ in the way they deal with those influences depending on the value they personally attach to them” (Schepens et al., 2009, p. 375). Teacher education programs that provide a foundation of discursive understandings of traditional notions of teaching aim to prepare their students with pedagogical tools to disrupt what has become known as commonsense.

**Enacting teacher self within today’s schools.** The daily practice of teaching and being in schools impacts teaching identity. In many instances, as Young (2011a) points out, “once people become teachers in schools, the schools also have their own sets of norms and values; these are sometimes at odds with the norms and values of university programs” (p. 10). As such, individuals must discover their sense of self as they enter and
begin careers within schools. As Guadelli & Ousley (2009) observed within a qualitative study with student teachers, through a process of sorting through their teacher-self through the lenses of their preparation and new experiences as they developed a pedagogical stance that best fit them. In effect, they were trying to find a workable sense of self that would comfortably mesh with how they viewed themselves and yet remain congruent within the realities of school. This sense of self arose through the various conflicts they encountered, the disjuncture of perceptions and realities (p. 938).

The disjuncture between university and school praxis causes teachers to negotiate and reconcile their teaching identity (Halpin et al., 2000; Olsen, 2008). Teachers have to resolve who they are within schools and merge what they have come to believe within that environment. In this way, “professional identity formation is often presented as a struggle because teachers have to make sense of varying and sometimes competing perspectives, expectations, and roles that they have to confront and adapt to” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 115). Whether those perspectives are from other teachers, administrators, parents, or their students, all teachers must continually sort through and practice who they are in relation to the rest of the world. Social location works to provide the teacher with both legitimation and/or disruption of the pedagogical compass they acquired during teacher preparation.

Montaño & Burstein (2006) discussed the first year experiences and perspectives of six teachers who identified themselves as activists and highlighted the struggles these teachers faced enacting their activist identities within school systems. Preliminarily, the article discusses the teachers’ pedagogical bases and the impacts that the participants’
teacher education programs (which focused on critical pedagogy, multicultural, and antiracist education) had on the teachers. Foremost, the teachers confronted difficulties in enacting their identities, but they could not abandon the critical perspective they had gained and their desire to make a difference. As such, within their classrooms they provided “space[s] in which children would learn not only about the subject areas mandated by the content standards, school officials, and others who place strict limitations… but also about the social and political injustices” (Montaño & Burstein, 2006, p. 186). As the authors demonstrated, when individuals become critically conscious about oppression, they often cannot ignore it (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Parkinson, 2008; Peters & Reid, 2009). Consequently, when teachers’ identities are transformed after critically engaging in, and internalizing, an understanding of the oppressive systems and structures within schools, they may actively find ways to resist and subvert the systems in order to maintain a positive sense of themselves, and their identity as teachers.

Critically evaluat(e)[ing] the school’s habitual practices and structures necessarily involves moral judgments and sometimes radical critique. This is turn implies the ability to perceive where things are not right, to think how things might be otherwise, to envisage other possibilities and, by affirming some rather than others, to position oneself in relation to them (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 717). As the article found, the first year teachers’ identities as critically conscious educators were not dismissed because they had internalized critical understandings of schools and, therefore, worked to resist the dominant discourse within their loci of control. With the ever increasing systemization of schooling through accountability and standardization,
teachers are being asked to adapt to and adopt pedagogical stances that diminish opportunities for autonomy within their professional repertoire (Ball, 1999; Connell, 1995; Halpin et al., 2000; Smyth, 2001). Nonetheless, even within this constrained system, individual and collective teachers are finding ways to resist to maintain their identities.

Embracing critical consciousness, enacting identity and finding ways to resist. Within educational literature, resistance is most often discussed through individual and collective efforts teachers engage in to maintain their identity. These subversions, therefore, become situated within “the subtle and complex interplay between external factors and individual agency” and begin to operate “on a daily basis throughout the education system” (Ollin, 2005, p. 152). Teachers engage within these resistances to “adhere to their own professional values … within the tension of these values and the needs of the system” (Watson, 2006). Primarily, disruptive work has two parts, to produce alternative frameworks of knowledge and meaning within their view of their schools, and to experiment with new ways of living and new forms of relationship to their daily educational practices as teachers (Bushnell, 2003; Sachs, 2000; Watson, 2006; Zembylas, 2003).

Resistance becomes situated within dynamics of power. As Foucault (1972) asserts, power does not lie solely within the sovereign. Power can occur when individuals and collective groups disrupt or subvert the dominant structures of a system (Sultana, 1989, p. 289). Resistance is, therefore, the agency and power individuals can exercise within their institutions at the individual, collective, or institutional level (Watson, 2006).
The power and agency that teachers exert to maintain their identity when faced with conflicting demands, becomes their means of resistance (Connell, 1995; Giroux, 1983).

Teachers utilize agency as a vehicle of resistance to maintain their teaching identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bushnell, 2003; Guadelli & Ousley, 2009; Ollin; 2005). Resistance, therefore, becomes a creative force that allows teachers to maintain their identity, in spite of and in relation to how others might view them (Zellermayer, 2001). It “reflect[s] an effort to maintain a story to live by” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 122). Through positioning these resistances as positive actions, teachers “express their freedom and their self-consciousness by recognizing their ethical responsibility to serve society” (Parkinson, 2008, p. 59). As the teachers in Montaño and Burstein’s (2006) study conveyed, in some ways, these “systematic constraints become individual dilemmas” (Britzman, 2003, p. 3) and act as a powerful reframing of what remains important to them (Ollin, 2005). When teachers choose to resist, they become politicized agents within their schools and classrooms, finding ways to work within these nodes of power.

Teacher’s classroom practices therefore become political acts, in which they are located within “symbolic ways of describing shifting relationships to power, language, authority and agency. Because the material conditions of subordination and domination are taken into account to explain person’s material practices and their understanding of knowledge and experience” (Britzman, 2003, p. 26). Teachers do this, as Giroux (1986) describes, through the ways in which they “actively resist and deny the dominant culture as it is embodied in various aspects of daily classroom life” (p. 100). As he asserts, teachers do have some power to produce, negotiate, modify, and resist within their schools (Giroux, 1986).
Teacher agency takes many forms, and the resistant activities they pursue are dependent upon the sources available to them and the goals they would like to achieve (Beijaard et al., 2004). Teacher agency can “include resisting the processes by which change is implemented; resisting inroads on personal or professional identity; resistance to general state of things by opposition to a political or ideological stance” (Ollin, 2005, p. 153). Specifically, as Peters & Reid (2008) state, “for practicing teachers, opportunities will manifest themselves in the day-to-day tasks that they undertake with individual children and youth, in classrooms, in schools, and in the larger community” (p. 558). For example:

by being aware of and monitoring language practices within their schools and speaking out consistently against such oppression is the only way to make unthinking students and community members aware. A simple resistive comment that provokes users of denigrating language to realize the harm they are doing by engaging in such discursive practice might be enough (Peters & Reid, 2008, p. 557).

As Peters & Reid (2008) suggest, within each teachers agency, resistance becomes categorized throughout the daily efforts teachers make to subvert dominant discourses. Practices could include the curriculum they expose to students (Broderick et al., 2008; Montaño & Burnstein, 2006; Zellermayer, 2001), the advocacy they perform on behalf of students and families (Bushnell, 2003; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Peters & Reid, 2008), and the manners wherein they speak out, against, and reframe discursive practices within schools and in their communities (Broderick et al., 2011; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Peters & Reid, 2008; Sachs, 2003).
Resistance by individual teachers “is a critical starting point because the leverage for change can be greater through the efforts of individuals” (Sachs, 2000, p. 85). Although teacher research values large scale collective resistances and often positions teachers as unable to have any independent power to change the contexts of their work, teachers work daily within “constructive subversions” to resist dominant discourses within schools (Carr, 2013; Ervelles, 2005; Ollin, 2005; Sachs, 2003). These subversions are situated within the work teachers do daily (Bushnell, 2003; Sachs, 2000). Activism and agency most often occur within the individual classroom, as these actions become situated within their locus of control (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Montaño & Burnstein, 2006). Thus, teachers, engage within these constructive subversions as a way of “making do” within their schools (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29). These methods of brokering everyday life, methods that de Certeau (1984) terms “tactics” allow teachers to “retain what they consider is important, and by doing so, to some measure at least, the external pressures for them to act otherwise” (Ollin, 2005, p. 160).

De Certeau (1984) describes tactics as “subtle resistant activity” that include “innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game... that is, the space institutes by others” (p. 18). This type of “resistance transgress(es), disrupt(s) and confront(s) larger forces; operates across individual and collective levels; is enacted through critical self-reflection coupled with action; and is contingent upon context” (Peters and Reid, 2008, p.551-52). Tactics, therefore, are based on individual contexts and opportunities that are available (de Certeau, 1984). Ollin (2005) suggests that although de Certeau seems to work within a framework where tactics are always construed as negative, “elsewhere he indicates ways in which people take positive action to transform existing
spaces and, through making their own space within them, affirm their sense of self” (p. 158). Within de Certeau’s framework,

the power of de Certeau’s analysis is in the representation of the capabilities of individuals and small groups caught in larger systems to retain those things that are important to them and co-exist with, whilst refusing to legitimate systems of dominance and control (Ollin, 2005, p. 158).

Although these types of resistances have their limitations, they cannot be ignored (Bushnell, 2003). Accordingly, research needs to take “a closer look at how teachers are actually undermining policy by their small-scale acts of principle” (Ollin, 2005, p. 159).

Positioning practice counter to dominant systems of control, and manipulating these practices toward your pedagogical location and belief systems, can be challenging. For teachers, advocating for students and promoting change “requires taking tremendous risks, including the charge of being ‘out-of-compliance’ with school regulations and decisions” (Levin, 1998, p. 164). Critically conscious practices disrupt traditional notions of what it means to be a teacher, possibly positioning individuals who practice them as oppositional within their schools and districts. In today’s schools, that resistance may be characterized through the work teachers engage within to speak back to and reframe deficit discourses that have been indicted from the standards and accountability based reforms. It may mean retaining fidelity to critical discourses that honor individual students and differences, instead of aligning with performance goals attached to reform initiatives. Resistance may also mean not always being as seen as compliant. Because being resistant requires a constant negotiation of identity, individuals may have to pick or choose which critically conscious ideas they remain loyal to and in which situations. This
may be in relation to the options that are (seen) or made available to individuals, as well as supports that are provided and can be leveraged. For example, a teacher may choose to speak up against oppressive or deficit based language in one instance but not another. Nonetheless, taking up a nonconformist stance may result in backlash and may position teachers “who challenge the status quo are regarded as unprofessional” (Gibby-Wachter, 2000, p. 62). Being seen as unprofessional, and a prevailing sense of isolation in adoption of pedagogy that may seem alternative to (or seem to against) traditional understandings of schooling can create “a sense of alienation … as a teacher interacts within a constricted system characterized by prescriptive accountability and pedagogy policies” (Parkinson, 2008, p. 52). In spite of these difficulties, research has shown that these teachers often utilize and engage in extended teacher networks and groups to sustain their ideological beliefs and maintain their identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Lee & Shaari, 2012; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Montaño & Burstein, 2006).

**Supporting identity maintenance.** Teacher networks and groups (such as professional development communities of practice, lesson study, and/or other collaborative inquiry groups) provide teachers with a shared purpose where they can engage in reflexive dialogue and problematize their work as teachers (Broderick et al., 2011; Lee & Shari, 2012; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Montaño & Burstein, 2006; Ritchie, 2012). These professional communities both legitimate teacher’s critically conscious understandings of schooling and provide literal spaces to engage with moral questioning of such practices (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Not only are they “a place … for socializing; there were discussions on practical issues of the classroom, and they helped each other with pedagogical ideas and strategies” (Montaño and Burstein, 2006, p. 186).
Within these groups, dialogue “becomes an integral part of the strategy for activating a community of activist professionals, it can be returned to, reflected upon and provide the basis for new dialogues, positions and strategies” (Sachs, 2003, p. 11). Further, as Sachs (2003) asserts, dialogue enables and encourages them [teachers] to examine the relationship between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use as they define and direct their separate and shared improvement efforts. In so doing, teachers and academics generate and sustain the energy for change within their evolving relationship… such practices enhance professional dialogue, generating analytical insights into and improvements of classroom practices in a variety of settings (p. 11).

Dialogue creates opportunities for convergent thinking, in which teachers collectively orchestrate and sustaın each other’s critically conscious practices. The space opens up radical possibilities for support and engagement, in which “networks provide teachers with the motivation to challenge existing practices and to grow professionally” (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992, p. 674). Moreover, dialogue gives teachers the “courage to engage students differently in the classroom—an opportunity especially valued by teachers working in urban schools” (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992, p. 674). Through collective work, teachers find ways to maintain who they are by finding ways to actively navigate these systems and support overall identity maintenance (Ritchie, 2012). Engaging within these support networks assists them in maintaining their critically conscious identity; by both providing a space to engage within continual dialogue and questioning of who the current education system benefits, as well as what pedagogically
beneficial practices they can engage within to support their students within these dominant systems of power, including special education.

**Theoretical Perspectives and Implications of Disability Studies in Education**

Although special education emerged from an advocacy and educational rights movement in which parents and families “rallied against the widespread discrimination, marginalization, and outright exclusion of their children with disabilities” (Ferri, 2009, p. 417), the dominant paradigm in which special education exists perpetuates systematic measures that inhabit many of the efforts social justice initiatives attempt to disrupt. In many ways, special education has been utilized as a justifiable mechanism for excluding students who do not assimilate or fit into current perceptions of what constitutes normal (Ervelles, 2011; Ferri, 2009). Through the current framework for special education, disability can only be observed within a context that marginalizes and stigmatizes individuals with disabilities, therefore undermining opportunities for transformative conceptualizations of disability by students with and without disabilities, teacher educators, and teachers working within schools and classrooms. This, along with many other troubling aspects of special education, demands critical reflection and intellectual engagement. Disability studies in education seeks to engage with these underlying systems that continue to perpetuate and reproduce stigma, especially within schools.

**Key tenets of disability studies in education.** Inherent to disability studies in education is a reconceptualization of disability within the socio-cultural model. Disability studies unlearns socially legitimated notions of the perceived commonsense nature of disability as an entity that is located within an individual, and situates disability within a social constructivist viewpoint that points to the material barriers bodies face in
attempting to access the environment, and around culturally constructed perceptions of intelligence and independence (Rice, 2008; Slee, 2009). Moreover, the socio-cultural model leads to questioning “the implications and the consequences that society (and the education system) places on difference” (Routel, 2013, p. 405). A social constructivist model provides an opportunity to critique current practices that have historically and contextually limited and oppressed opportunities for individuals within schools.

Within a DSE framework, disability can become situated as a sense of pride and empowerment, and as a culture that should be celebrated, not subjected to oppression (Rice, 2008; Thompson, 2011; Ware, 2005). Disability, therefore, becomes defined as a “culture that is based on the recognition of their different bodies—not in spite of their disabilities but because of them” (Ervelles, 2005, p. 71). Disability is no longer affixed to medicalized notions of cure that locate individuals with disabilities as objects of care (May & Ferri, 2002) but dynamically shifts toward positioning disability as a natural human variation, where individual narratives inscribe a more robust understanding of disability and interconnect the experiences within and between disability (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Rice, 2008; Ware, 2005). Disability studies in education, therefore, positions individuals with disabilities as experts on their experiences and allows them to narrate their stories and experiences (Gabel, 2005), instead of privileging professionally prescribed knowledge that has typically positioned medical professionals, teachers, and administrators as experts on the experiences of people with disabilities (Charlton, 1998; Danforth, 2000; Ferguson & Ferguson, 2008; Ware, 2001). Through this reframing of disability, commonsense constructions of disability begin to be perceived
within a social and structural phenomenon and new ways of knowing disability begin to emerge.

By observing disability through a socio-cultural framework, we can begin to reimagine disability and attempt to deconstruct ways in which disability has become known. Key to the deconstruction is scrutinizing ableist tendencies that continue to subjugate individuals with disabilities within special education. Ableism asserts that the nondisabled body has become privileged and centered as a normative criterion; justifying practices that station disabled individuals on the margins of society (McLean, 2008). Accordingly, DSE situates ableism “in the same vein as racism, sexism, and heterosexism” asking “us to consider how normative notions of performance and participation can inhibit access to meaningful educational experiences” (Ashby, 2012, p. 94). Traditional schooling practices (including those that continue to manifest with the current reform initiative) often maintain and produce the “devaluation of disability [that] results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled children rather than only other disabled children” (Hehir, 2005, p. 15). The assumptions that permeate understandings of disability and promote the differential or unequal treatment of individuals with disabilities become subject to critical engagement (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977). Therefore, subverting and resisting current systems that impose such ableist tendencies is a goal of DSE (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; McLean, 2008; Thompson, 2011).

**Intersectionality.** DSE seeks to engage with the intersecting methods of oppression that run in and though schooling practices. DSE positions disability in a
similar light as race, gender, and socioeconomic status; it works to interconnect the lived experiences of individuals whom identify with and within various identity categories (Hall, 2011). Understanding the ways that identities intersect is crucial in challenging assumptions that govern determinations of power and privilege. In this way, “intersectionality is not simply about bringing together these markers and their theoretical responses, but to consider how each supports the constitution of others” (Goodley, 20010, p. 33). Intersectionality, therefore, works to navigate and find ways that “theorize identity in all its complex multiplicity” (Ervelles & Minear, 2010, p. 31). Without taking into account and/or thinking about intersectionality, our analysis will remain “disconnected from a fuller understanding of [disability] experience” (McDonald, Keys, & Belkazar, 2007, p. 147). For example, in a qualitative study by Ahran and Fergus (2011) examining the disproportionality of minority students within special education in suburban settings, researchers found that teachers explicitly tied deficit thinking directly to their cultural understandings of minority and socio-economic status. Researchers stated overwhelmingly “through their [the teachers] use of cultural deficit thinking teachers begin to attribute their students’ academic troubles to the students’ socioeconomic status, family, and culture” (p. 142). Only though examining ability within these “multiple levels and through the confluence of various policies, practices, and beliefs” (Ahran & Fergus, 2011, p. 140) can we begin to take into account the various ways in which identity and experience are mediated. By examining how the relationships between and within class, race, and gender play a role in defining what continues to constitute normative behavior, particularly within schooling, we will be able to unpack, as McSorley (2000) point outs:
normative references that value, among other things, order and compliance to “white” rules and dominant codes of power. The perception that readiness for mainstreaming and inclusion is dependent on the learning of appropriate social skills and values is very prevalent among special and regular educators. However, white educators that I have met fail to acknowledge these skills are based on white frame of reference, and fail to question the consequences of this form of gatekeeping (pp. 30-31).

Accordingly, DSE attempts to reconcile the interconnected ways in which individuals have been oppressed within schools, exposing the “white,” “middle class,” and “able-bodied” frame of reference (Ervelles, 2011; Reid & Knight, 2006). Intersectionality can be utilized as an emancipatory theoretical and analytical tool in interrogating and deconstructing educational discourses of individual and social pathology that evoke and legitimize the constitution of the ‘non-ideal student’ in current schooling (Liasidou, 2012, p. 168).

Using intersectionality as a theoretical tool for understanding the complexity inherent of the current schooling experience of individuals who both work with and as identify as disabled supports the continued intellectual deconstruction of these ideas.

It is empirically documented that disability has become linked with multiple and intersecting sources of oppression, like ethnicity, social class, gender and poverty (Dyson & Kolezski, 2008; Ervelles & Minear, 2010; Garcia and Cuellar, 2006; O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Ong-dean, 2009; Reid & Knight, 2006; Van Kampen, Van Zijverden, & Emmett, 2008). In many ways, the relationship between race, disability and class could
be characterized as a “vicious circle” (Van Kampen et al., 2008, p. 19) as students whose identities intersect outside of “white” and “middle-class,” most often become entangled within a complex web of special education through educational and societal assumptions that result from socially constructed and legitimated understandings of ideal behavior and/or learning. The culture and organization of schools situates these students as deficient and therefore places them further at risk for special education label and services (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006, emphasis added). Using this rationalization, a pathologization of “students of color, the poor, and immigrants [who] lie outside the predominant norm and, therefore, belong in special education” (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 19). In this way, “societal interpretations of and responses to specific differences from the normed body are what signify a dis/ability” (Annamma, Connor, Ferri, 2012, p. 3). Disability labels are therefore utilized to designate what is normal and what is not (Baker, 2002).

The association between race and poverty with disability has resulted in a marked overrepresentation of individuals of color and individuals from lower SES backgrounds within special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Ferri & Conner, 2005; Conner & Ferri, 2005). The most recent National Research Council report (2002) even defined the impact of poverty in explaining the overrepresentation of minority students within special education. Their findings identified a correlation between sociological stressors that children living within poverty are more likely to experience, and the impact those stressors have on the developmental readiness of children entering schools, as a main reason why so many students of color living in poverty are labeled. Further, it presupposes that more children of color are living in poverty, with very little
substantiated evidence to support that assumption. Their logic is problematic. The researchers' linkage between low SES, race, and disability was based on deficit-based assumptions. At the same rate the study highlights the complex interactions that work in and through the continued marginalization of particular intersectional identities.

As discussed within an earlier section, individuals of color and/or from low socio-economic status continue to be overrepresented within special education; most often with high incidence labels such as learning disability, intellectual disability and/or emotional disturbance (Artiles et al., 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002). High incidence disability categories are often considered “soft” categories because

these disabilities often lack clear biological etiologies, their definition and operationalization (including eligibility criteria and the validity and reliability of measures and assessment processes) can be fraught with ambiguity, uncertainty, and bias (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 370).

Even more, because these “soft” categories rely on subjective criteria (unlike categories that may be construed as “hard” such as deaf, blind etc.), they could be further construed as a reflection of societal interpretation (Annamma et al., 2012). As Rhodes (1995) suggests, the vast majority of students assigned to these “controversial categories of pathology….come from populations and cultures we have ‘othered’ on the basis of color and socioeconomic status” (p. 460). In these ways disability is being utilized to “reconstitute social hierarchies in contemporary contexts via the deployment of a hegemonic ideology of disability that have real material effects on people located at the intersections of difference” (Ervelles & Minear, 2010, p. 341-42). For example, in a study
by Sullivan and Bal (2013) in which researchers were examining the overrepresentation of minority students within special education, of the 18,000 students within the study, descriptive analysis showed racial minority risk varied across 7 disability categories, with males and students from low-income backgrounds at highest risk for being assigned these disability categories.

Through educators’ critical examinations and understandings of what disability labels have come to signify, educators can begin to account for and make sense of how power works in and through schooling. By critically examining these experiences, teachers begin to “call(s) attention to the use of disability labels as a response to perceived difference, as a means to maintain the location of power within some groups and exclude others” (Collins, 2013a, p. 284). Further by understanding the intersections of systems of oppression and challenging the multiplicity of factors that disable certain groups of students entail critiquing dominant ideologies, educational policies and institutional arrangements that maintain and perpetuate social and educational injustice (Liasidou, 2012, p. 170).

Thus, when teachers are exposed to disability studies (within an intersectional lens) within teacher preparation they begin to unearth critically conscious understandings of who benefits from school, district, state, and federal policies within education. Preservice and in-service teachers may begin to alter their perceptions and forge an identity that attempts to disrupt the overarching systems of power that maintain these dominant systems and help them to resist the disabling practices that maintain this positioning.

**Teacher education and disability studies.** An epistemological engagement that is grounded within disability studies “is necessary to engage new thoughts and alternative
philosophical perspectives and to welcome ideas that do not sit easily with current beliefs and assumptions” (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 276). In the absence, educators will continue to deny the intrusive paternalism of the existing system, disbelieve that the system reinforces stereotypes of dependence and inferiority, dismiss the logic of the social construction of disability, and dispute their own complicity in pathologizing disability (Ware, 2005, p. 108).

In order to alleviate the definite disadvantages that individuals with disabilities have become subjected to, schools of education and leaders in educational institutions (whether local, state or federal) must work to resist what has become known as commonsense within schooling. One site that I assert can have a tremendous impact on special education is teacher education and preparation, as teacher education can significantly influence what their graduates believe and do (Ashby, 2012; Peters & Reid, 2008; Routel, 2013; Smith, 2010; Utley, 2009). Because disability studies asks individuals to rethink their assumptions about disability, teacher education grounded within disability studies can help to break down deficit discourses traditionally assigned to and taught about disability and special education.

Typically, education programs have utilized a disability of the week approach to teach about special education. By organizing content in this light, disability becomes isolated (without an understanding of intersecting identities) within a singular category and situated within the various categorical markers and characteristics as “the most salient ways of knowing disability” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 75), ignoring the complexity of experiences in which disability manifests itself and positioning special education as a specific ritualized set of skills. Moreover, these programs often present
disability solely within the medical context, reaffirming ableist assumptions that individuals with disabilities must be fixed or made more normal. As such, “the current theoretical orientation to disability that special education teachers bring to the classroom places the problems that disabled students have in accessing classroom learning solely and squarely on the student” (Mutua & Smith, 2008, p. 129). Disability, therefore remains, synonymous with understandings of people with disabilities as broken and in need of remediation and fixing. Looking at special education through a traditional lens “prevents our aspiring teachers from thinking about the deep structures of disablement” (Slee, 2004, p. 47). Through a transformation of special education teacher training in line with DSE, “connections are made between deficiency and disability” and move “towards an examination of the practices that produce these connections” (Routel, 2013, p. 417). DSE seeks to engage teachers in interrogating and reframing what they have come to believe about disability and, subsequently, to inform their practices in order to transform their classrooms, and school communities (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Broderick et al., 2008; Peters & Reid, 2008).

By understanding disability within a social-constructivist lens, teachers no longer perceive disability as an individual problem intrinsic to the child but as a barrier that has been constructed within the learning environment (Ashby, 2012; Mutua & Smith, 2008; Routel, 2013). Teachers, therefore,

see themselves as responsible for intervening in these students’ learning by designing instructional accommodations and calibrating their instruction to engage their students. Differences in beliefs are associated with differences in practice, not only in quantity and extent of student engagement of teacher
interventions with students with disabilities, but with overall teaching
effectiveness with all their students (Jordan & Stanovich, 2007, p. 24).

By framing disability in this manner, teachers no longer look outside of themselves but
rather look at how they can transform their practice to suit the needs of their students in
order to include all students (Gallagher, 2005; Landorf et al., 2007). Teachers are,
therefore, given “permission to be creative problem solvers and to reach out to others
from different disciplines” (Ashby, 2012, p. 96). DSE asks teacher candidates to examine
the barriers that exclude certain students and whom these exclusions benefit. By thinking
deeply on both, teacher education candidates hopefully come to conclusions that reaffirm
the socially constructed aspects of schooling. Exclusion, therefore, becomes unjustifiable
and synonymous with the maintenance of systems that oppress, while inclusion becomes
an ideological commitment and an implementation of best practices (Ferguson &
Nusbaum, 2012).

Through a disability studies in education lens, inclusion becomes more than just
finding ways for student to fit into prescribed notions of what schooling is (Young &
Mintz, 2008). It moves toward an understanding of difference as part of natural, human
variation, and positions teachers to infuse an interdisciplinary understanding of disability
and difference into their practice. Given this, DSE encourages teachers to embed
disability and other culturally relevant pedagogy throughout their curriculum (Valle &
Conner, 2011; Rice, 2008; Ware, 2001; Ware, 2005). Particularly because disability is
often situated as the “elephant in the room” (Valle & Conner, 2011, p. 190), teachers
must explore disability in order to break down assumptions that have manifested as
commonsense in order to transgress the disability as deficient paradigm. One way to disrupt presumptions about disability is to infuse disability within the K-12 classroom.

Embedding lessons on disability into the curriculum is an approach that could be instituted in numerous ways. For example Peters, Klein & Shadwick (1998) utilized a journaling project, in which the researchers asked students in a high school English class to participate in self-reflective journaling about their experiences around disability. These experiences led students to critically reflect and understand the marginalizing experiences of disability, including a watered-down curriculum and low expectations. Moreover, by providing space for disability in the curriculum, students were able to critically engage with and question disability outside of individual experiences, and ultimately led them to create a manifesto for changes to school policy that stigmatized students with disabilities.

Experiences that infuse and introduce disability as an interdisciplinary area of study, push students within K-12 to reconceptualize disability as part of the human experience, instead of individualized and isolated experiences that are unique (Rice, 2008; Ware, 2001). Likewise, coming to know disability differently, engages students within their own critical consciousness raising experiences, and, as evidenced by this study, position students to call for action against such oppressive tendencies. Disability is not typically part of the standard curriculum, that is to say it is not something that has to be taught, teachers “must go outside the lines of occasion” (Bushnell, 2003, p. 266). Making the choice to expose students to these types of curriculum is in itself an act of resistance.

Paramount to engaging with disability within schools is the development of teachers who see themselves as agents of change. It most ways DSE goes against commonsense conventions about what matters in education today (narrow performance
indicators and standards). Nonetheless, if you fundamentally believe in the social model, you can only exist within schools by recognizing and addressing the underlying oppressions that marginalize individuals within your practices as a teacher. As such, teacher education programs that are grounded within DSE situate their teachers as change agents and provide them with theoretical tools to practice and assert their identity (Ashby, 2012; Smith, 2010). Through the reexamination of “the interconnected parts of the education system that perpetuate separation as the norm…” teachers and teachers educators “look for openings within the educational system for inclusive educators to grow” (Young, 2011b, p. 492). Schools of education can do this by participating in critical conversations about current schooling practices, positioning students to engage with the underlying oppressive systems, and providing them with concrete practices that help facilitate inclusive classrooms (Ashby, 2012; Routel, 2013; Ware, 2005; Young & Mintz, 2008).

**Essential tenets of DSE teacher preparation.** Although DSE is a relatively new field of inquiry, many scholars within DSE have, and continue, to focus their professional efforts on advocacy and engagement within teacher education and preparation programming. There are key tenets to teacher education programs that are grounded within a DSE pedagogical orientation. Foremost, programs must have specific coursework and philosophical orientation that critically analyze current special education programming through a socio-cultural lens (Ashby, 2012; Broderick et al., 2008; Broderick et al., 2011; Peters & Reid, 2009). These courses or programs may include specific coursework that embeds an exploration of the various models of disability and utilize critical pedagogy to examine the numerous ways in which disability has been/ can
be constructed, including historically, legally, within schooling and directly from the individual and their family (Ashby, 2012; Peters & Reid, 2009). This most often includes, consideration of course readings, including “program texts—media presentations, textbooks, instructional materials, tests, and articles—[that] are supplemented with first-person narratives—poems, autobiographies, essays, and fictional accounts—written primarily by parents, teachers, and persons with disabilities” (Peters & Reid, 2009, p. 553). In addition to disability, these courses position the socio-cultural lens in relation and comparison to race, gender, sex, and class, challenging and destabilizing normative references (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011).

Another aspect of vital importance to DSE teacher programming is the manner in which programs teach about inclusion. As Oyler (2011) asserts:

We understand classrooms to be sites of cultural and social reproduction. Therefore, teachers must be able to examine cultural and social hierarchies for the ways inequality and injustice are produced and perpetuated within the curriculum, the classroom, and the school (p. 5).

Inclusion, therefore is not a place or a service, but a philosophy, in which the practice of teaching demands innovative thinking to unpack and disrupt culturally normative practices, not as a ritualized set of skills (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011; Peters & Reid, 2008). Under this guise, teachers must be active problem-solvers and agents of change to include all children. As such, teaching methods that are most often explicitly taught relate to universally designed, differentiated, culturally relevant, and constructivist models of instructional design and development (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011). These methods of pedagogical orientation, ask teachers to think more purposefully on the how and why of
teaching and learning, and provide multiple avenues for all students’ supports, strengths, and needs to be accounted for directly within lesson planning. Even more, educators are often taught how to explicitly infuse disability into the curriculum.

In addition to being philosophically grounded in inclusion, most programming leads to either dual certification or is named inclusive education at both the graduate and/or undergraduate level (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011). Dual certification is important because it destabilizes the explicit demarcation between general and special education that traditionally insists on specific skill sets for each type of certification, thus dividing the responsibilities of general and special educators through specified credentialing. Although there is no definitive list of what makes up a DSE teacher education program, this essential criteria lays the foundation for programs grounded and pedagogically oriented toward DSE.

**Current research on teachers and DSE.** Research that focuses specifically on the lived experiences of educators who espouse a DSE pedagogy is essential to foregrounding this work. In a study querying recent graduates who self-identify as holding a DSE pedagogical stance through an online extended questionnaire around how DSE is relevant to their teaching practices, Broderick et al. (2008) found that DSE pedagogy, “shape[s] the ways in which they frame and understand their own students, enabling them to ‘think about’ not only their students but also their ‘perception of ability/disability’ and ideas about ‘normalcy,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘social justice’” (p. 146). They found that DSE framed the ways these teachers viewed their students and the choices they made around instruction. Yet, all of the respondents expressed how “difficult and painful/isolating/ exhausting/ draining/ discouraging/ disheartening” (p.
having these commitments can be in their daily work in schools. Although it is
difficult work, respondents overall stated that they have some modicum of satisfaction
and have made some progress towards realizing practices and a culture that supports DSE
in their buildings and classrooms. As one practicing teacher stated, “we know that
alternative conceptualizations are discouraged, but feel they’re imperative” (Broderick et
al., 2008, p. 153). Moreover, a former teacher stated,

In coming to understand that education is a political, social, and economic
institution inherently designed to serve the dominant, privileged component of our
society, my focus changed from blaming the victims to recognizing the crisis
within our public school system. This realization fueled an evolution, or perhaps
a revolution is more apt, in my teaching practice (Broderick et al., 2008, p. 149).

Another Broderick et al. (2011) engaged within a collaborative inquiry circle, in which
she, along with seven elementary classroom teachers whom had recently graduated from
a teacher education program grounded in DSE, met monthly for a year. Researchers
wanted to explore the gap between theory and practice by exposing how these teachers
experienced their identity within schools. Results were similar to the 2008 study, with
one distinct difference, the collaborative group created an area where the teachers could
problem solve and think creatively about solutions to re-story disability within their
schools and classrooms. In their transgressive work the teachers found that there was a
“clear commitment among the members of our inquiry circle to engage in their teaching
as forms of political activism” (p. 837). By occupying and practicing a critically
conscious stance, teachers had come to understand and embrace the political work of
schooling and “expect to live with conflict, ambiguity, complexity and tensions in the
lives we pursue as teachers” (Broderick et al., 2011, p. 829). Findings of the 2011 study also spoke to the limits that DSE perspectives may have on addressing broader issues of inclusivity, including issues of difference and identity within education. As one teacher in the study observed “the focus on instructional practice and technique (offered through the sole lens of inclusion to ramify disability isolation and rejection) often neatly obscures larger, more significant questions about the nature of curriculum and the cultural practices of schooling” (Broderick et al., 2011, p. 838). This finding seems to be addressed in some manner through the utilization of pedagogical methods that discuss and infuse discussions on intersectionality and social justice as a method for meaningfully including all students. However, although the experiences of both of these groups of educators was difficult, DSE perspectives enabled these teachers to “act transgressively and to re-story notions of both ability and disability in education“ (Broderick et al., 2011, p. 839).

**Conclusion**

This chapter provides a portrait of the varying and competing demands that have been placed on the educators who took part in the study. The contexts of the study are vitally important to understanding the negotiations that these teachers are engaged within in order to practice a DSE identity within today’s school culture. In general, the literature points to the impositions that standardized and accountability-based reforms have placed on teachers and students within today’s school. Because of the nature of the study, the literature also focused in on the multiple consequences and assumptions that have come to fruition from these reforms for students with disabilities, specifically. The reform
initiatives focus on and criterions for achievement continue to have an immense impact on students, teachers, and schools daily.

Since the study examines individuals who self-identify with a DSE identity, I then explored and discussed the critical aspects attached to teacher identity theories and DSE. Because DSE could be assigned as a critically conscious identity, the literature I focused in on discussed how critically conscious identities can be cultivated by teacher education programs and how these identities manifest themselves within today’s schools through teachers’ resistant work. Overall, literature on teacher identity theories pointed to resistant work as an effort to maintain a positive self-concept of oneself. Taking up and utilizing a DSE framework within schools is in itself a resistant activity; individuals who take up this identity make a clear commitment to talking back to and reframing special education and disability, in relation to both the current reform initiative and underlying mechanisms that we call special education. In order to discern foundational characteristics of understanding disability and special education from a DSE perspective, I discussed key theoretical components of DSE, including implications for teacher education programs and classroom practices grounded within a DSE framework. In order to fully conceptualize the project, it was vitally important for me as a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the multiple and connected mechanisms that continue to mediate the identity of DSE educators within today’s schools. Without these connections, I would have had a difficult time fully understanding the lived experience of participants who were involved.

To date, research in this area has been concerned with the how educators who identify as DSE feel about their identity and work connected to that identity in relation to
the current realities of K-12 schooling and special education. Although the current literature in the field provides a great foundation for the fields’ understanding of the vital importance of these alternative narratives to deficit and medically based conceptions of disability and schooling, it fails to provide real and sustentative pedagogy and praxis that identifies how DSE identities are taken up within schools and classrooms. This dissertation is designed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how participants made meaning of their transgressive work in relation to their students, colleagues, and overall systems within their daily lives as public school teachers by attending to the following research questions:

1. How do teachers who have been educated within DSE framework resist dominant deficit discourses within schools? What are the negotiations and work these teachers do to maintain a disability studies in education aligned pedagogical practice?

2. How do the standards and accountability-driven alterations to the school environment, culture, and identity position teachers in relation to their DSE identities? In what situations do participants’ teaching identities become situated as malleable within today’s schooling contexts and environments?

In order to fully explicate the phenomenon, the next chapter will explore the specific research procedures and protocols that I utilized to understand the lived experience of the teachers who were part of this study.
“Context and the representation of multiple voices, especially as they relate to a critical or ideological framework for the conduct of qualitative research, signify a challenge to push continually at the edges of what we are comfortable with, to stretch ourselves to consider complex aspects of contexts we study that might otherwise be unattainable methodologically. When we pose questions specifically about disability, we are appropriately pushing those outside of special education to consider their own practices as well as fostering an appreciation for the importance of transforming the lives of individuals with disabilities” (Pugach, 2001, p. 447).

In this section, I outline and discuss the qualitative research methods I used to investigate how teachers make meaning of and experience schools after coming to know disability and special education through a DSE framework. Additionally, I discuss procedures I utilized in gathering and analyzing data. The chapter is broken up into four sections, beginning with a discussion of qualitative, phenomenological, and transformative research that is situated within disability studies research framework. In the second section, I discuss the criteria and the methods I utilized to recruit and select participants. Third, I describe the procedures that I utilized in order to capture my informants’ experiences and perspectives, including the processes I employed to code and analyze the data. Finally, I examine my own epistemic reflexivity and engage with critical self-reflection around my role as a researcher. Focusing on participants’ perspectives and experiences around this particular phenomenon—clashing of inclusive and critical ideologies with the priorities of the accountability movement—points to the
increased pressures teachers face daily when navigating schools and classrooms. Therefore, the study’s design was not aimed at proving or testing a particular theory or approach, but, rather, at highlighting the complexity of the work teachers engage in to maintain their identities within school environments that do not necessarily support their ideological commitments. The next section explains how a qualitative research frame can be utilized in conjunction with disability studies in education as a transformative research platform.

**Qualitative methodology:**

Qualitative research tries to unearth how people “make sense out of what is happening to them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 248). It is an approach to understanding how people experience the world “from their own frames of reference and experience reality as they experience it” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 27). Qualitative research is thus, a means to understand how individuals make meaning. At the forefront, therefore, a qualitatively focused study tries to make sense of “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” (Flick, 2007, ix).

Qualitative research assumes that “human experience is mediated by interpretation. Objects, people, situations and events do not have meaning; rather meaning is conferred to them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 27). It seeks to “understand what people assume, but are also given, and co-construct meaning multiple positions across contexts” (Arzubiaga et al., 2008, p. 319). Qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals perceive and experience. As such, the social constructivist framework is
integral to understanding how the individuals are experiencing teaching within the accountability and standards-based reform era.

As a methodology, I locate qualitative research as situated cultural practice. According to Arzubiaga et al. (2008):

The notion of research as situated cultural practice proposes that what drives research, its purposes and uses, how meaning is made during the implementation of research practices, and the knowledge and representations that are produced are culturally and socially mediated and negotiated processes (p. 310)

Since I situate qualitative research in this manner, I believe that it must be positioned theoretically through an intersectional lens, in which lived experiences of individuals are more meaningfully exposed, explicated, and comprehended (Ervelles, 2011; Pugach, 2001; Reid & Knight, 2006). By coming to understand research in this way, researchers can begin to resolve how peoples’ discourse and actions “reflect how they resolve the constant tension between (a) the rules prescribed by their cultural community (b) the positions they assume in particular circumstances and situations that compel them to negotiate, comply, or innovate” (Holland et al., 1998 as cited by Arzubiaga et al., p. 321).

The negotiations my participants made are complicated and can only be fully conceptualized through a deep engagement with their personal and professional experiences and perspectives, which must be understood as complicated, personal, and messy. As May (2015) states, “intersectionality’s critical utility for identifying gaps and erasures in conventional social justice models, theoretical frames, and political practices, continues to hold much promise” (p. 83). By engaging with my participants through an intersectional theoretical perspective, I was able to more meaningfully conceptualize the
meaning and relationship participants have constructed to their own and their student’s intersectional identities in today’s schools. Through the method of inquiry, I can begin to understand and take into account the specific terms in which these teachers operate at this particular moment in history.

Further, qualitative research methods can provide tools to understand these experiences as they are committed “to bring[ing] to the surface stories of those whose voices have not been heard, those who have been oppressed or disenfranchised in schools” (Pugach, 2001, p. 443). As such, qualitative research provides a platform for participants’ voices whose experiences and perspectives are often left out of, and at odds with, existing social relations within their terms (DeVault, 1999; Greenleaf & Katz, 2004; Pugach, 2001). Recording these voices may assist in challenging current reform-driven prescriptions and provide alternative frameworks for viewing and conceptualizing the reality of schools as it has been understood. Qualitative research can, through these exposures, “serve emancipatory efforts to resist oppression” (Baez, 2002, p. 36).

Lastly, using qualitative methodology allows me to understand the dominant discourses that these teachers are subject to as they make meaning of special education and schooling. A close examination of participants and how they make meaning of disability and special education in terms of DSE and critically conscious raising pedagogy, as well as how those meanings were negotiated by participants within schools, may begin to illuminate the work teachers are doing to maintain their identities. For me, this sheds light on how their identities are mediated and experienced within the standards and accountability based reform era.
Phenomenology as method. Phenomenology has a long history rooted within the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl (Merriam, 2009). Husserl argued that the positivistic scientific paradigm was “…flawed for studying human beings and their lives because it could not consider human consciousness in its meaning-making capacity” (McPhail, 1995, p. 160, emphasis authors). Husserl believed that the positivist paradigm could not describe the essential phenomena of the human world, including values, meanings, intentions, morals, feelings, and the experiences of human beings (McPhail, 1995). Phenomenology, therefore, seeks to disrupt the positivistic scientific paradigm in order to bolster a deeper and more thorough understanding of the “desires and beliefs that shape the activities of individuals within specific cultural contexts” (Tafera, 2011, p. 51). As McPhail (1995) points out, “the goal of this type of research is not to arrive at an explanation, but rather to come to understand the processes that human beings engage in as they construct meanings from experiences” (p. 163).

Phenomenology is closely associated with the conscious experiences of “everyday life and social action” (Schram, 2003, p. 71). Researchers “situate their investigations of consciousness within the everyday world. It is in the everyday world that human beings constitute meanings that guide their actions” (McPhail, 1995, p. 162). As such, phenomenology is concerned with aspects of embodiment, and the individual’s subjectivity acts as the starting point for research, as it is in how he or she experiences and perceives the world (Levering, 2006). By beginning to grasp what individuals have constructed and take for granted as true, phenomenology seeks to reveal how individuals react to and live within a socially constructed world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Moustakas, 1994).
Principally, phenomenology is concerned with excavating the experiential knowledge of a group of individuals as they make sense of and perceive a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). In essence, phenomenology seeks to make visible the universalizing experience around that phenomenon. Phenomenology is concerned with:

- examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of the phenomenon or experience is achieved … and …
- seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments and understandings (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58).

Consequently, the focus of research is describing and constructing what all of their participants have in common (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of the researcher is to provide thick descriptions of “what” and “how” a group of individuals experiences the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2012). Therefore through phenomenological research, “a set of understandings sustained in and through the shared assumptions of the interaction” are revealed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 489-90). Phenomenology provides avenues to begin to document individuals’ lived consciousness and provide strategies to sustain their identities as they maneuver through everyday realities.

**Qualitative research & phenomenology as informed research.** Qualitative and phenomenological methods as a research framework can expose the lived experiences of individuals experiencing the phenomenon of special education and disability. The research develops a platform, whereas the researcher can begin to “understand what people assume, but are also given, and co-construct meaning across multiple positions
and contexts” (Arzubiaga et al., 2008, p. 319). By drawing on qualitative and phenomenological research, in which the research method is designed to recognize and capture complexity, it “…provides an important means of helping us to disentangle the intricate relationship between disability and diversity and of understanding how that relationship operates in the day to day” (Pugagh, 2001, p. 450). Phenomenological research that is within the tradition of qualitative inquiry can help to contextualize my participant’s experiences and aid in disrupting the positivistic paradigm that now surrounds special education and disability of remediation and cure.

**Disability studies and the transformative paradigm:**

Traditional research within special education has focused almost exclusively on empiricizing quantitative data, emulating “hard science,” and promoting the conclusions made by these researchers as unwavering facts that are neutral and valid (Connor, Gallagher, & Ferri, 2011; Reid, Robinson, & Bunsen, 1995). Although qualitative research is seen as a viable and empirical methodological tool, the field is still over-reliant on quantitative research (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugac, & Richardson, 2005; Connor et al., 2011; Hahn & Hegamin, 2001; Pugach, 2001). In a recent study about the prevalence of qualitative methods within learning disability research, Connor et al. (2011) found that only 3% of journals’ articles published in the field’s top four journals in 2008 employed strictly qualitative research methods. Even more stark is that 91% of the articles published during this period relied solely on quantitative research methods. This mirrors what other researchers have found around the bias of the field (particularly academic journals) toward quantitative research methods (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Odom et al., 2005). The field’s preoccupations within a narrow
scope of interventions and assessments “quantify disability through evaluations that adhere closely to the ‘functional limitations’ paradigm” (Hahn & Hegamin, 2001, p. 114). Through these limited conceptualizations of what constitutes research, methodology often prescribes particular notions of disability that legitimate certain forms of knowledge production and ignore understandings of disability as a sociopolitical construct. Thus, traditional research in special education and disability undermines the particular cultural contexts in which all studies should be situated, instead focusing on socially construed notions of disability within medical definitions that emphasize disability as an individual entity that needs to be fixed (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Danforth & Gabel, 2008; Gabel, 2005; Hahn & Hegamin, 2001; Rice, 2008; Slee, 2009). Even more, the continued validation and partiality of these methods as superior often reinforces the foundational assumption of special education that individuals with disabilities are broken and analogously hinders opportunities for transformative understandings of disability and special education within research and practice. Within these restricted forms, quantitative methods may be misused to serve dangerous purposes that further stigmatize (Hahn & Hegamin, 2001).

Research that is published about special education acts as a compass of “best practice” within public schooling. Increasingly, practices within schools have remained static and unwavering, limiting opportunities to adopt a transformative stance around disability, as more and more of today’s legislation within the United States focuses on practices that are “scientifically research based” (NCLB, 2002; RTTT, 2008). As such, practices and programs that are implemented within schools (that teachers must often make part of their pedagogical practice) most often reflect assumptions associated with
traditional special education and quantitative research methods, in which individuals must be provided with remediation to “fix” and normalize their performance (Boardman, Argüelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klinger, 2005; Odom et al., 2005). Traditional research on and about special education and disability often reduces disability to a “highly limited knowledge base” (Connor, 2013, p. 495) that misunderstands and misrepresents individuals with disabilities. As McPhail (1995) points out:

The positivistic scientific view and practice is not appropriate for advancing the field today. The explicit reduction of human life to attributes of the natural world has created a view of the individual with disabilities as mechanistic and psychological in the narrow sense, rather than holistic and psychological in the broad sense of being culturally responsive … the desires and beliefs that shape the activities of individuals with disabilities in specific cultural contexts are not well understood (p. 160).

However, within the last few decades, numerous dialogues have emerged, particularly within DSE, that call for a reconceptualization of method within special education and the social sciences that begins to account for and reimagine disability.

Emerging methods in DSE have sought to disrupt traditional epistemological engagements with disability and probe us to reconsider how we have come to know what we know about disability. In particular, DSE moves researchers away from methods that seek to conceptualize disability inside the medical model and toward an understanding of disability as socially constructed (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugah, & Richardson, 2005; Brantlinger, Klingner, & Richardson, 2005; Danforth, 2006; Hahn & Hegamin, 2001). Disability research becomes positioned within a social-constructivist framework
that accounts for, contextualizes, and examines lived experiences and histories, which assist in shedding light on alternative explanations for discrepancies in student achievement and behavior (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Connor, 2013; Connor et al., 2011; Reid et al., 1995). Through the reframing of method within a DSE framework, varying representations of disability materialize that “can inform instructional practices and can contribute to improved learning outcomes for children with disabilities” (Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1997, p. 277).

DSE asks researchers to contemplate, “What questions are made possible/impossible by the research methods employed, and how is the very content of what we can study proscribed by foreclosing alternative research methodologies?” (Connor et al., 2011, p. 109). Undoubtedly different research designs are needed to answer various research questions in an increasingly complex field (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Brantlinger et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Odom et al., 2005; Pugach, 2001). By recognizing and utilizing a plurality of methods we are offered new realities which uncover and expose the marginal discourse and begin to make visible what has yet to be represented, “producing research that responds to the growing diversity of the student population across and within multiple contexts” (Arzubiaga et al., 2008, p. 314). By remaining open to and espousing various qualitative research methods, we can provide room for individual and collective voices that uncover lived experiences and the marginal discourse (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such, within disability studies one of the main emphases has always been “telling different stories” (Taylor, Ferguson, & Ferguson, 1992, p. 296). Through these engagements, qualitative research has the power “to broaden our understanding of the experience of disability, as well as to shake ourselves
from complacency regarding changes that are required to achieve equity” (Pugach, 2001, p. 446).

**Transformational paradigm.** Research aimed at understanding disability from a DSE perspective sits within a similar light as traditions like feminist inquiry, in which researchers “aim at intellectual revolution that will transform … tradition … in order to subvert the established procedures of disciplinary practice” (Devault, 1990, p. 96). This can be positioned as:

transformative academic knowledge… [that] …challenges the facts, concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations routinely accepted in mainstream academic knowledge. Those who pursue transformative academic knowledge seek to expand and substantially revise established canons, theories, explanations, and research methods (Banks, 1993, p. 3).

Research that sits within a transformative paradigm, therefore, can be utilized to challenge the status quo and further social justice (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Mertens, 2008; Mertens & Ginsburg, 2008; Mertens, 2010). These paradigms work within the hopes that “if we ground research and evaluation in assumptions that prioritize the furtherance of social justice and human rights, then we will utilize community involvement and research methodologies that will lead to greater realization of social change” (Mertens, 2008, p. 3). Mertens further elucidates that this research paradigm can be utilized to address both “ongoing challenges in the world…” and “…the need to acknowledge that addressing issues of power, discrimination and oppression can play a key role in redressing inequities” (p. 3). Thus, the transformative paradigm is guided by three themes:
1. Underlying assumptions that rely on ethical stances of inclusion and challenging oppressive social structures

2. An entry process in the community that is designed to build trust and make goals and strategies transparent

3. Dissemination of findings in ways that encourage use of the results to enhance social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2008, p. 5)

Moreover, transformative research, like research grounded within disability studies tenets, can help to break down power. As Baez (2002) contends “if power works when individuals repeat structures that constitute them, then transformative research helps individuals to recognize the harmfulness of repetition and the imperative of disruption” (p. 52). As Baez continues, even if the disruption is “not successful” it still illustrates resistance to the oppression. Disability studies in education can act as a transformative paradigm for knowledge production.

Although much of the work associated with the transformative paradigm typically researches a marginalized and oppressed group, the relationship and experiences of teachers to their students with disabilities can illuminate the power dynamics working through and within schools. There are multiple intersecting levels of power that emerge within the phenomenon I am studying. At the forefront, the students with disabilities whom these teachers are working with are most often marginalized and wield little to no power (Harvey-Koelpin, 2006). At the same time, these teachers are attempting to disrupt reproductions of discrimination that these students face, while themselves being pressured and under constant scrutiny within the standards and accountability movement at the federal, state, district, and school levels. The complex interaction between the
overarching policies and school and classroom practice has positioned teachers in marginalized ways (Apple, 2007; Ravich, 2013). In this way, research on teachers can be used to provide a response to the discrimination and oppression these students are continuing to face within schools. One rhetorical theme that continues to emerge out of the reform movement is that teachers are to blame for ill-performing schools and students. Nonetheless, teachers still have to work within the constrained system, therefore further complicating the work these teachers have to do to resist. Even more, teachers who resist are often positioned in stigmatizing ways as they try to work within the very system that is marginalizing them (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). The multiple and various levels of power working in and through this work demand careful scrutiny, in order to begin to understand how each works within and through one another.

Within this dissertation, I utilize qualitative inquiry in the tradition of phenomenology to begin to understand how teachers’ experiences within schools are mediated by their disability studies identity. Through phenomenological interviewing I was able to unearth how individuals that espouse that identity continue to experience schools that are mediated by the demands of the accountability and standards based reform movement. In this next section, I describe how these participants were recruited and the various collection and analysis methods I employed to understand their identity within schools.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation:

Participant selection and criteria. The project studies the work teachers who identify with a disability studies orientation perform. These participants were selected utilizing both purposeful sampling, where participants are intentionally chosen because of
the specificity inherent to research questions underlying the study, and through snowball sampling, where individuals already part of the study recommend additional individuals who are relevant to the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Flick, 2007).

The following criteria guided my selection. First individuals were considered who attended and participated within institutions of higher education that meet the following criteria:

1. the sponsoring university offers a four-year undergraduate degree or Master’s or doctoral degrees;
2. the programs offer a formal academic program, including a degree, concentration, specialization, minor, major, or certificate in Disability Studies;
3. the programs include disability course work in non-clinical and non-instructional fields (e.g., the Humanities, Social Sciences, Literature, Law, Policy Studies, or the Visual or Performing Arts); and
4. information describing the programs can be found in written form or on a university web site (CHP, 2013) as outlined by Syracuse University’s Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies.

In addition to institutions that were described above, participants who attended institutions that did not meet these criteria but met specific criteria outlined below were also considered.

I considered participants who had attended and graduated from a university or college whose teacher education program that was specifically grounded within a disability studies pedagogical orientation and/or whose purposes include a critical analysis of and engagement with current special education programming through a critical disability studies lens. Individuals who have attended and graduated from
institutions that met at least four of the following criteria were considered: (1) Socio-cultural foundations of education and disability embedded directly within coursework and accessible through online course descriptions and/or program overview; (2) Program has at least two dedicated disability studies faculty; (3) Institution has a stated disability studies center or program; (4) Program is either specified as inclusive teacher education training/programming and/or leads to dual certification; and/or (5) Program employs a social justice perspective that positions educators as agents of change. Further, the information outlined above had to be readily available and situated within program overview and objectives or be embedded directly within coursework.

In addition to the criteria described above, individuals whom were selected also (1) held a current teaching licensure (2) were employed and taught within the last year within a public school and (3) self-identified with DSE tenets. Particular attention was paid to teacher education programs where DSE pedagogy has been embedded into their credentialing program and participants had to have taken at least two courses that could be identified as DSE or had been taught by a dedicated DSE faculty.

Utilizing DSE networks, including faculty recommendations and introductions, I recruited 29 participants who graduated from various institutions and programs across the United States. Since participants’ institutional experiences (they were identified utilizing DSE networks) met the criteria for selection, participants were initially queried through email about the second set of minimum criteria for participation (Did they have a current teaching license? Were they/had they recently been teaching in a public school? Did they self-identify as DSE?). After participants confirmed that they met these criteria, they were asked to fill out an initial participant information sheet (see Appendix A at end of
manuscript). These questionnaires were utilized to ensure participants had adequate educational background in disability studies and to collect demographic information about the participants, their educational experiences, and teaching experiences. In addition, information was gathered about any other experiences (outside of coursework) that participants had that aligned with their disability studies in education identity. The information received from the initial participant information sheet led me to select 14 individuals who met the information outlined above. Of those 14, 11 were able to participate within the study (three were unable to because of other outside commitments and time constraints). The initial participant criteria questionnaire proved to be rather helpful, allowing me to sift through and identify the individuals who had varied and rich experiences as teachers and within disability studies in education that I describe below.

Participants. My dissertation centers on the experiences and perspectives of 11 teachers who identify as having a disability studies in education identity. Because identity permeates how we make sense of the world around us, our social location—age, race, dis/ability, gender, class, religion, etc.—it has an immense impact on how these teachers enact and understand their disability studies in education identity within schools. Of the eleven participants, nine identified as women and two identified as men. Three participants identified as having a disability. Participants’ teaching experience ranged from 2 years to 28 years, with an average of 11 years. Although I attempted to recruit participants from varying institutions and backgrounds to account for and diversify the study based on racial background, only two of the individuals in the study identified as nonwhite (both identified as biracial). This included focusing more on recruiting participants from more racially diverse areas (including larger cities and metropolitan
areas). I had difficulty finding individuals from nonwhite backgrounds, and although at multiple points I attempted to connect with individuals who identified from varying ethnic and racial backgrounds, I was ultimately unsuccessful. This is partly due to the vast overrepresentation of white/Caucasian teachers within the workforce; currently, only 18% of the nation’s educators identify as a teacher of color or nonwhite (study identifies African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American as nonwhite) (Boser, 2011). In order to more clearly delineate between participants, a chart is attached directly in the manuscript text directly after the descriptive information about each of the participants and is also at the end of this manuscript (see Appendix B). Appendix B sums up each participants demographic information, experiences, and relevant background information.

The next section provides an introduction of my participants, how I was introduced to them, as well as a brief biographical sketch. My hope is that these brief introductions will highlight and characterize my participants’ backgrounds and experiences and give the reader an opportunity to contextualize the data that I present later in relation to the experiences and perspectives of my participants.

Ava. I first met Ava when she was a graduate student in a clinically rich master’s program, where I was acting as the school-site liaison. Although simply by her appearance one might assume that Ava was white, she described herself as Latina and biracial. Ava had grown up and lived most of her life in and around Miami, Florida around a large Latino family, but had relocated to New York State to attend her undergraduate institution. She decided to stay at the same institution for her master’s degree in secondary inclusive education and had subsequently received a teaching position nearby. When I first began to conceptualize the study, my advisor and a member
of my committee immediately suggested Ava as a participant. She had contacted both of them at numerous points during her first year of teaching seeking advice and consultation around issues of social justice and inclusion within her classroom. At the time that I interviewed her, she was beginning her second year teaching in a multiple service delivery role for the small rural district, which was located in the Northeast United States. She described her role as three-fold: co-teacher in a 7th grade ELA, self-contained ELA teacher, and as a resource teacher. According to the school principal, Ava was hired in the district to “shake things up” and from my own experiences, that was something she was capable of doing. As a resident teacher, she was vocal about supporting students and had run into trouble with her mentor teachers because of her advocacy on behalf of her students and families. Ava could be critical of her colleagues and although she had a few allies that shared her socially just orientation in her current position, she said she often felt like she was in a constant fight against the system and the low expectations that students with disabilities, of color, and from urban centers faced at her school.

**Lyra.** I was introduced to Lyra by two faculty members who recommended her for the study. Lyra was a young, white woman who had taught in New York and in Iowa. Lyra was beginning her third year teaching full time when I conducted my first interview with her. She had recently graduated from a master’s program in inclusive elementary education that utilized a disability studies in education approach. She had also attended and taken classes during her undergraduate program that focused on disability studies. Although she had previously taught in an inclusive elementary classroom, after relocating to a midsize city in the Midwest, she had taken a position as a behavioral specialist for a self-contained mixed grade elementary classroom. Lyra was conflicted about teaching
within a self-contained classroom, but felt that through this position, she could help provide viable supports and scaffolds to her students to begin to be more fully included within the general education classroom—citing Tim Villega’s blog as a way in which she made sense of her identity and navigated the politics of working within a self-contained classroom. Much of Lyra’s decision to become a teacher had been molded by her brother’s experiences within schools. He was identified as having autism and according to Lyra “had very few opportunities or expectations” within his K-12 schooling. Her own experiences advocating for her brother, partnered with her undergraduate and master’s degrees, had prompted Lyra to teach the parents of her students about the law and to promote multiple and varied ways to advocate. Although Lyra tried to help her parents work the system through these methods, she had continually noticed the cultural capital and privilege that provided some parents with the means to do so, while others continued to struggle. At the time of the study, Lyra was struggling to make sense of and break down barriers to inclusion for all of her students.

Erika. At the time of the study, Erika, whom I would describe as a veteran teacher, had been teaching for a total of 12 years (two of them as an autism specialist) within the dual role of self-contained and inclusive preschool teacher in a largely white and affluent suburban district located on the West Coast of the United States. Erika described herself as white and middle class. Although most of Erika’s students were not included within the general education classroom for the whole day, her self-contained preschool classroom included multiple typical peers. She had come to teaching many years before she had come to know disability and special education through a disability studies in education lens, but stated that “something never felt right about how we talked
about disability” or “how we excluded these kids.” The connections she felt between disability and marginalization were bolstered by her own experiences with her son and daughter, both of whom had been identified with autism. Before learning about disability studies, she centered this understanding on the basis of her Christian upbringing. After being referred by a colleague to disability studies and enrolling in her doctoral coursework, Erika began to make sense of and take on alternative constructions of disability. Although she had been an advocate for inclusion for some time, she stated that her experiences with disability studies had a huge influence and informed her current teaching practice. She was referred to me by two disability studies in education faculty members.

**Nina.** During the onset of the study, Nina was beginning her second year as a teacher within a small rural district located within the Pacific Northwest. Nina was white and in her mid-twenties. Before pursuing her master’s degree from a teacher preparation program that was significantly influenced by disability studies, she had taken coursework that led to her certification in elementary education. But during the program she felt ill-equipped and unprepared to work with students who were identified as having disabilities. That experience helped her decide to pursue her master’s in inclusive education and unbeknownst to her, her journey toward beginning to frame disability and special education within disability studies in education framework. Nina stated that disability studies changed her whole perspective and impacted her daily practice. This transformation was evidenced throughout her first year at the school, where she had met with and developed multiple and ongoing professional in-service presentations on inclusion, disability, and differentiation for the staff at her school; facilitated a service
delivery audit that moved the school toward less restrictive service delivery options; and convinced the principal to hire two other special education teachers to ensure adequate service delivery options. Although she had begun to notice a shift in the school away from this transformative and inclusive ideology, Nina continued to position herself as an agent of change, a teacher leader, and advocate for inclusion. But the work she was doing to make change was difficult and tiring. She had noticed the headwind and momentum that she had facilitated the previous year, had not been progressing forward because of many of the demands that were associated with a new scripted curriculum and benchmark testing that had been introduced to the school. Nina was referred to me by two disability studies faculty.

Amelia. At the time of the study, Amelia was starting her first year as an AIS (Academic Interventions Service) teacher and had previously taught eight years as an 11th grade English teacher in a large suburban high school located in the Eastern United States. Prior to that, she had taught seven years as a learning specialist in large metropolitan city located in the Northeast. Amelia was the first general education teacher that I interviewed for the study. Amelia was in her mid-thirties at the time of the study, was white, and identified with a physical disability. At the time of the study, she had just returned from medical leave that she had taken the following winter. Although Amelia had previously been named teacher of the year, she stated that the recent and ongoing stress and pressure that had become associated with the new teacher evaluation system and implementation of the Common Core had triggered a substantially intense re-emergence of a chronic illness had pushed her into medical leave. After being approved by her doctor to return to school in the fall with accommodations, Amelia had faced
substantial backlash from the district. Although her previous teaching practice had been influenced by and centered through disability studies and social justice, she stated that her own personal experiences with disability in her school and as an educator had been significantly reframed since she had come back and began to request various accommodations. She stated that although she had had a disability for some time, she had “finally felt what it was like to face discrimination about her disability.” She was referred to me by a disability studies faculty from her master’s program.

**Angela.** Angela was a PhD Candidate and beginning her 29th year of teaching when we first talked. She had been referred to me by a disability studies in education faculty member at a university that had a disability studies in education program. At the time of the study, she had held her current position as a Resource specialist or self-contained and push in special education teacher at a medium-size suburban elementary school on the West Coast for the last 15 years. Angela described herself as white and middle class. She had recently been transferred to another school in her district, after she had begun to propose steps toward moving the school toward being wholly inclusive. At first, when Angela and I talked, I found many of the ways in which she thought about and discussed disability and inclusion were not completely aligned with a disability studies in education framework. Foremost, although she had believed in inclusion based on the work she had done to include many of her students, at the same time she stated she felt like she could do her best for her students when she was their main teacher and was in control of what was going on within the classroom. Similar to Lyra, she felt like she could do what was best for her kids in her own classroom because she had more control. Some of this startled me, and when I asked her for more specific details on advocating,
integration of disability/race/class into the curriculum, and inclusion, her answers often drifted away from disability studies, toward the marginalization of special education teachers. During our second interview, I focused on the varying ways that she thought about disability studies impacting her current practice within the school. She talked specifically about the influence that disability studies in education had had on her own advocacy efforts and in her efforts around inclusion. Although a lot of Angela’s focus continued to sway back to the marginalization of special education teachers, she described specific instances and experiences that were influenced by her identity as DSE.

**Norman.** I came to meet Norman after he replied to a call for participants that faculty at his doctoral program university had posted on their disability studies LISTSERV. Norman described himself as white and able-bodied. At the time of the study, Norman had just (that summer) left his position as a secondary special education teacher within an autism focus structured classroom to become a Program Coordinator for special education. The new position was located in the same medium-size suburban district in which he had taught for the past 11 years. Teaching was Norman’s second career; he had previously worked with individuals with disabilities as a speech pathologist. After deciding to pursue teaching in order to make a bigger difference in the lives of individuals, Norman enrolled in a credentialing program. After teaching for five years, he decided to pursue his PhD and immediately felt a strong connection to disability studies. He stated that disability studies made sense to him. He attributed this “fit” to his parents’ influence on him and their involvement within social justice initiatives growing up, including the civil rights movement in the sixties. When he was working within the medical model as a clinician, he found that while the diagnosis and information he was
trained to provide might be helpful, it did not provide the full picture of the individual—often reducing the individual to her or his deficit and disability. Norman stated that after enrolling in the disability studies PhD program he saw visible changes to his practice as a teacher. Although he was working within a self-contained setting, he found ways to re-imagine disability for his students, their parents, and the school as a whole.

**Eric.** Eric was introduced to me by a disability studies in education faculty who had met him within one of his classes and subsequently been part of his dissertation committee. Eric described himself as white and having ADHD and an auditory processing disorder. Eric stated that his personal experiences within public school as a person with a disability prompted him to become a teacher. He said that he wanted to help students understand and know that they were important, even if all of the parts of school didn’t help them to see that. At the time of the study, Eric had just finished his 15\textsuperscript{th} year teaching and 8\textsuperscript{th} year as a reading and English teacher in a large suburban middle school in the Eastern United States. Before teaching at this district, he had been a Differentiated Instruction Lab Teacher at a local high school. Only recently, four years ago, had Eric been exposed to and begun to position himself and his teaching within disability studies in education. He stated that when he learned about disability studies, “it just fit” with his overall teaching practices, which he had framed utilizing a social justice stance. Throughout his career, he had practiced inclusion, differentiation, and many of the elements of DSE, but not named the practices disability studies. But since being exposed to and discovering the language of disability studies, he had seen visible changes in how he spoke about his teaching practice and had begun to utilize more materials that focused on and attended to cultural relevancy associated with disability.
Anna. Anna was introduced to me by another participant whom she had known from graduate school. At the time of the interview, Anna was beginning her second year as an Autism Specialist within a large suburban district in which she had previously worked as an elementary special education teacher. Anna described herself as white and able-bodied, she was in her mid-thirties at the time of the study, and was in her final semester of coursework. Anna had begun her educational career as a teacher’s assistant and special education aide within general education classrooms, which led her to seek out and attain certification in general education and, eventually, special education. After six years working as a special education teacher in a variety of positions within the same district, she decided (with some prompting from a colleague in the PhD program) she wanted to pursue her doctorate in disability studies. Although her career in special education had been significantly influenced by her own family’s experiences and identities of disability, she stated that her understanding of disability because of her “exposure with Disability studies and inclusive education expanded and grew more in-depth in ways I couldn’t have imagined.” Throughout her career, she had pursued inclusion for her students, but disability studies gave her a language to think about and work within the system to better include students with disabilities. Although she struggled at times with enacting disability studies, she felt supported by her PhD cohort and the administrator in the school that she was working within at the time of the study.

Molly. Molly was in her fifth year teaching when we first talked; at first she was apprehensive about being part of the study because of the new teaching credential she was seeking in English as a Second Language and the birth of her new baby. But after a few emails, she was persuaded to participate in part because of her belief in disability
studies and inclusion. Molly repeated to me numerous times (through email and during the interview) that she thought participating in the study was bigger than her experience, but that her participation may bring to light particular challenges that educators faced and may assist them in helping to prepare future teachers. Previously, she had worked at an inclusive school near her respective graduate institution for two years; she described that position as “amazing … wholly inclusive and transformative”; that teaching position was more in line with her identity. But because of financial reasons, she and her husband had to move, and she had accepted a job in a less inclusive position. During the time of the study, she was in the midst of her third year as a self-contained teacher for K-3 students that she described as having more significant needs, in a small rural district in Iowa. She stated that the school didn’t fit philosophically with what she believed was best for kids and didn’t seem to be interested in moving in a direction that supported all kids (at least in regard to her students). Her classroom, along with one other classroom at the school, contained the only students not included and she wasn’t happy “because I haven’t seen those moments that are so powerful when you work in an inclusive setting.” Although the school had been doing an excellent job supporting and including an influx of students who were identified as ELL, according to her they weren’t interested in her students. Because Molly had seen inclusion, both at her previous district and with her sister’s disability, and had been part of a grant that helped foster more inclusive service for students with more intensive communication needs, she knew it was possible. She was frustrated with the school and its lack of presumption of competence regarding students. But she was passionate about inclusion and disability studies and decided that she had to “work the cracks” of the system to support the inclusion of all students.
Yvonne. Yvonne was in her 7th year teaching at an elementary school in a large urban district when we spoke. She had been at the same school as a special education teacher since she began teaching, but her role had morphed back and forth and back again between self-contained and consult teacher throughout the seven years. She stated that most teachers did not want to be consult teachers and were resistant to the ICT model, but she happily took up any role that her administration asked. Yvonne identified herself as biracial, but stated she identified as a person of color more than as a white person. She had just turned 29 when we had spoken and was in the midst of her third year in her PhD program. Yvonne talked with ease about her experiences with DSE and schooling; she prefaced almost every response with, “I just talked about this with…” DSE seemed to be a consistent and constant point of conversation in Yvonne’s life. She had come to know disability from a disability studies lens after her master’s program; like other participants, she stated it just made sense. She centered and positioned her understanding of disability as a social construct through deep personal reflections of privilege, racial disparity, and exclusion. Throughout our conversation, she brought up numerous examples and instances in her own teaching where she had noticed these intersecting methods being utilized to continue the cultural exclusion of certain groups. She strongly believed that the structures that were embedded within schools were only penetrable through what she called an “Inside Revolutionary” stance, or the small ways in which she worked the system to do what she believed was best for kids.

Participant Chart (Appendix B)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Total Years Teaching</th>
<th>Teaching (rural/urban) (elem/ high)</th>
<th>DSE courses taken</th>
<th>Race/Class/ Disability</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Self-Contained Preschool (Structured Autism course)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Suburban Large Preschool</td>
<td>PhD disability studies</td>
<td>White/ Female/ No disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Self-contained Elementary, previously inclusive co-teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural Medium Elementary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White/Female / No disability</td>
<td>GA- Center on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Inclusive co-teacher and resource</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Small Rural Elementary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White/ Female/ No disability</td>
<td>GA- Center on Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Inclusive co-teacher, self-contained content, and resource/ inclusive co-teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rural Small Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Latino/ White/ Female/ Not identified (history of anxiety &amp; depression)</td>
<td>Grew up going to classes that were inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyra</td>
<td>Self-Contained Elementary (Behavior Focus)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Urban Large Elementary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White/ Female/ None</td>
<td>Brother identified with autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Resource, previously self-contained</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Suburban Medium Elementary</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/ Female/None</td>
<td>Inclusive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman</td>
<td>School Administrator (previously secondary self-contained)</td>
<td>11 teaching 3.5 months admin</td>
<td>Suburban Medium</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Male/ None</td>
<td>Adjunct and lecturer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data Collection.** In order to understand the meanings that these teachers conferred to their DSE identity, I utilized repeated in-depth and semi-structured phenomenological interviews. In-depth interviewing is “a conversational, lengthy, and interactive exchange of ideas, during which the researcher works to develop a close relationship with participants so that responses are deep and meaningful” (Trainor & Graue, 2013, p. 126). The phenomenological interview is usually undertaken through semi-structured interviewing, which allows “the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 104). Because it is a flexible process, the
phenomenological interview is able to unearth individuals’ life histories and provide room to begin to make sense of and understand how they have come to perceive the phenomenon in their daily life (Bailey, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). But as with any interview, the researcher must be careful to “listen well, question closely, and observe details” to fully conceptualize her or his participant’s experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 248). Moreover, a characteristic of phenomenological interviewing is the researcher’s experience with the phenomenon; as such the interview is not one-sided and provides space to more intimately perceive the phenomenon being studied.

As a researcher, topics of interest most often occur in a naturalistic manner, in which we have had some exposure to or experience with what we are studying—briefly, we have something at stake within our research. Phenomenologists “believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 7). As such, before beginning most phenomenological studies, the researcher must first consider her or his own subjectivity and experience in terms of the phenomenon. In order to accomplish this, the researcher ‘brackets’ her or his personal experiences and memories and shares presuppositions in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Oreshkina & Greenberg, 2010). Through my exploration and bracketing of my assumptions in order to flesh out my preconceived notions, I wanted to listen to their experiences and what that identity meant to them within today’s schools.

The goal of bracketing sits within a similar tradition to that of feminist interviewing, in which the phenomenological interview seeks for the researcher and
researched to engage within a conversation, in which they build knowledge together (DeVault, 1990). Through:

an investment in finding answers, her own concern with the questions she asks and her ability to show that concern, that serves to recruit her respondents as partners in the search … the researcher is actively involved with respondents, so that together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple, straightforward ways (DeVault, 1990, p. 100).

The relationship to the subject matter and the method of interviewing alleviates some of the tensions associated with the traditional hierarchical positions associated with researcher and researched, as both parties engage in discourse that disrupts traditional notions of power associated with knowledge production (Devault, 1990; Gordon, 1997; Watts, 2006). Furthermore, “the two-way interaction inherent in the methodology provides a non-threatening environment where the researcher and participants can share and explore issues more extensively and openly” (Bailey, 2013, p. 236). For example, in a study by Groenewald (2004), the researcher bracketed his own experiences with cooperative adult education in South Africa through a deep questioning of his own experiences and responses to the research questions of the study. He contended that by bracketing his own experiences, the interview became reciprocal, whereas the interviewee and interviewer engaged in shared dialogue. The goal, therefore, for my interview(s) was to engage in experience and knowledge sharing, or engage in a dialogue about disability studies and teaching identity.

Although for in-person interviews, I interviewed individuals in person at a location of their choice, I knew because of the breadth and nature of the study, I would be
unable to be in the same physical location as most of the participants. In these cases, I conducted interviews with participants outside of the Central New York area via Skype. Although, initially I was wary about utilizing Skype (I thought the distance between the participants and I would take away from the intimate conversation between two individuals), I believe the extended amount of time, as well as the clear enthusiasm and investment of my participants about their experiences in schools and their identity as disability studies, alleviated the initial issues around gaining and maintaining a rapport with my participants whom I interviewed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For both methods of interview (online and in person), the oral interview information was audio recorded, with participant permission, to ensure accuracy of the data collected.

For the purposes of the study, I interviewed individuals two times. Each interview lasted between one hour and two hours. During the initial interview, interview questions laid a foundation for the exchange between participants. This included participants’ perspectives and experiences of their role as teachers, how they came to know and understand DSE, how they translate their DSE identity within their classroom, school sites, and in the community, and the ways they negotiate their identities with the increased focus on standardization and accountability (see Appendix C for foundational interview guide). When I was first conceptualizing the study, I had hoped to conduct focus groups that could act as collaborative inquiry circles, but because the purpose of the study shifted its focus toward unearthing the multiple methods and strategies that individuals educated within DSE take on, I decided to conduct a national study in order to provide a more universalized portrait of the experiences and perspectives of these teachers. In order to have participants “engage” in dialogue with one another, I utilized
multiple in-depth semi-structured interviews and interpreted data after my first round of interviews to further develop interview questions. Below is figure 1, which depicts my specific data collection methods. These methods are described in more detail in the proceeding paragraphs after the figure.

*Figure 1: Data Collection Methods*

After conducting each interview, I transcribed and analyzed the data to further develop subsequent interview questions. In this manner, subsequent interview questions were developed inductively from the interviewees’ responses. For example, within the majority of my first interviews I noticed that many participants discussed the increased difficulties that they had enacting their commitments to DSE within their classroom
because of the increased demands of standardization and accountability. In order to more fully understand what they perceived as difficult, I asked more specific questions about when, how, and with whom these difficulties asserting their value systems manifested, as well as how they worked around these perceived instances of infidelity. Through repetition and cross analysis, I was able to utilize findings from each subsequent interview round and craft responsive and collaborative interview questions that helped me begin to mediate conversations among participants.

During the second round of interviews, I focused in on the particular ways that my participants understood disability studies in relation to their experience as teachers; questions and conversations included delving deeper and with more specificity into what it means to them to have a disability studies identity within schools today, how that identity was and continues to be challenged, and how they sustain themselves and their beliefs surrounding disability and special education. For example, in the first interview, many of the participants discussed that they had to tread lightly, as well as pick and choose specific instances when to engage in specific reframing and exposing of DSE with colleagues. In the second interview, in order to more fully understand what this meant, I decided to ask participants how and in what ways they chose to engage in individual conversations about DSE. These interviews also gave me an opportunity to ask more in depth and to follow up questions I still had from the first interview. I focused on and tried to understand and examine the complications and contradictions that were present within my participants’ responses within the first interview.

The second interview also helped me begin to talk across interviews. For example, since part of the project was to mediate conversations between participants to
help support their identity maintenance, I found myself talking across interviews when
the opportunity came up. This included sharing professional knowledge and resources
that I was familiar with, as well as pointing out general methods of support that I had
begun to notice among and across participants’ contexts. Although at first I felt uneasy at
providing this support, I realized that because of the nature of the study and my moral
commitments, the level of reciprocity that my support provided was in line with and
appropriate for my intended research purpose and experience. For example, one of my
participants, Ali, was struggling with helping her paraprofessionals understand and
practice presuming competence with her students. At this point, I discussed some of the
resources that I knew were available about presuming competence and working with
paraprofessionals. At other times, if I noticed a participant was struggling within her or
his current school, I would suggest possible sources of support that were mentioned to me
by other participants that they could utilize within their school, in their community, and
online.

In addition to interview data, I collected personal and official materials and
artifacts that participants created or utilize within their classrooms, schools, and
communities. Participants were asked to provide artifacts that they perceived
exhibited/represented how their DSE identity manifested itself within their daily practice
(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This included, but was not limited to, presentations,
documents, journals, blogs, videos, reflections, classroom resources, and individual
action plans (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Flick, 2007). These material artifacts provided me
with concrete examples of what disability studies practices looked like and how they
were translated for these teachers. The artifacts also gave me a sense of the varying ways
in which the idea of disability studies was interpreted daily within the varying schools and communities. For example, through these artifacts I noticed the work that elementary and high school teachers were engaging in around self-advocacy was vastly different based on their locations, resources, and how the individual educator had conceptualized self-advocacy. One teacher had thoughtfully embedded multiple and varied classroom resources throughout the course of year, while another had a standalone self-advocacy project. Through these representational artifacts, I was not only able to gain richer insight into the negotiations and experiences my participants engage within to enact their identity within schools, but these artifacts were utilized to corroborate and anchor data analysis and implications (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Flick, 2007; Trainor & Graue, 2013). Although these artifacts helped in the researchers’ understanding of how disability studies manifested within the day-to-day lives and identities of participants, for the purpose of this study, data analysis focused more deeply on data collected during interviews.

**Data Analysis & Interpretation.** Throughout data collection, I conducted analysis on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the study (Bratlinger et al., 2005). Analysis followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process (Smith et al, 2009). IPA method provided me with a framework to analyze data inductively and across sources where I attempted to elicit the key experiential themes in the participant’s talk (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Analysis took on four interconnected aspects, which included (1) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (2) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (3) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view, and (4)
psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). In order to support my overall organization and analysis of data, I uploaded all data sources unto Dedoose (Dedoose, 2014). Dedoose is an online qualitative and mixed methods data management system that is located in the Cloud. Dedoose can be utilized for excerpting, coding, and analysis and provides tools that allow researchers opportunities to examine and utilize multiple perspectives when collecting and analyzing data. Transcripts and supporting documents were uploaded onto this online platform, where they were interpreted utilizing the steps described above after each subsequent round of data collection and, finally, after data collection was complete. Figure 2 on the next page shows the process I utilized for data analysis during the course of this study.

With this process in mind, after conducting my first interviews and collecting teacher-produced artifacts, I began by first listening to interviews. After listening, I then uploaded, read, and re-read each participant’s case (interviews and artifacts) on the online qualitative software, Dedoose (Dedoose, 2014). Analytically, I let the data from preliminary interviews and documents guide my frame of reference and help me construct my analysis. This was done in order to immerse myself in the data to ensure the focus of interpretation was the data, my participants, and their experiences. The process included associations and initial connections that I was making across transcripts (both within each case and across participants). During this first step, I also bracketed (see researcher statement in the next section for more thorough discussion) how I was experiencing the data as a researcher (through small phrases, journaling, and mind-mapping). I specifically tried to notice and feel participants’ experiences and impressions in relation to the phenomenon as I both reheard and actively engaged with the data. I then
re-read each transcript and began to add more detailed descriptive, exploratory, and conceptual comments and questions to begin to unearth how each participant was experiencing her or his disability studies identity in her or his personal and professional lives. These notes or “free associations” provided me with an opportunity to immerse myself “in the participant’s lifeworld and engage in deep data analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p.84). This included the language they chose to utilize to confer that identity to individuals in their life, and to themselves. It also exposed the context, or how that identity was experienced at that moment in time. Many of these comments and questions informed my second interviews.

Figure 2: Qualitative Data Analysis Framework

After completing my second interviews, I then read and re-read my preliminary notes and the textual data with and against one another in order to begin to make sense of
and map the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between each of the interviews (both at the case level and across participants). The process was done through a visual mind mapping to help me identify and explore connections and relationships I was beginning to make between and within data (an example of this mind map is below).

*Attachment 1: Data Analysis Mind Mapping Example*

Within this example, I was exploring how participants made sense of and connected standards-based reform in relation to their practice within schools; it included participants’ conversations on and about staying true to themselves and their values, self-
preservation, leaving the profession, and the impact of administration on their experience with the reform movement. The mind mapping process provided me with an opportunity to analyze across and within data sources for examples and emergent themes, as well as meaningful visual cues to assist in my cross-comparison across each of the various data sources. By analyzing data at these multiple levels and excavating patterns, I was able to compare the repetitions and relationships obtained in each analysis for similarities and differences. An overall understanding of the teachers’ negotiations revealed “not only commonalities in the data and analyses from both methodological approaches, but even the discrepancies and different facets that become possible only after the triangulation of methods and research procedures” (Flick, 2009, p. 88). Analyzing the data in this way helped me to understand the shared experiences with the phenomena, as well as the unique ways in which participants experienced DSE within schools. Moreover, the themes began to reflect “not only my participant’s original words and thoughts but also [my], the analyst’s interpretation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92).

Although many of these experiences varied (based on participant background, experience, and current school placement), I found multiple and connected ways in which their perspectives and experiences were similar. But I also found that the individual contexts, along with experiences within and outside of the system of schooling, had a huge impact on how their commitments and values manifested. For example, I noticed that veteran and more rookie teachers used the systems of special education law and procedures in varying ways; veteran teachers seemed to have a more nuanced approach meaning that participants understanding of the public and hidden systems and procedures of special education in their school significantly impacted their resistance and identity
work. Throughout the analysis process, I also noticed and constructed connections between participants’ use and understanding of practicing DSE in relation to choosing when or when not to engage in explicit reframing and exposing with colleagues and parents toward central concepts of DSE (i.e. language use, deficit-based perspectives, and generalizing disability) based on the amount of perceived power. Through this realization, I was able to “consider the ‘how’ along with the ‘what’ of the textual data” and recognize how individual context “contributes (to) understanding the meaning behind the participant’s words” (Cooper, Fleisher, & Cotton, 2012, p. 5). The process provided me with an even greater opportunity to honor each individual who participated, by not only letting the story that my participants shared converge, but for divergences from that narrative to come to the surface.

Finally, in order to make sense of the data, I began to “draw(ing) together the emergent themes….,” in order to “…produce(ing) a structure” to convey the connections between participants’ individual and shared experiences with the phenomenon more formally (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96). After developing an overarching coding framework from the mind mapping process, I re-read and re-analyzed transcripts on Dedoose using the methods of abstraction (pulling out and identifying patterns), polarization (focusing on where stories diverged), and numeration (frequency) to more fully and clearly understand the overall patterns and connections between my participants’ experiences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 98). The coding framework followed the IPA framework.

Coding categories were single words or phrases that represented overall topics and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The codes that surfaced (and that I constructed) from my analysis related to language, the setting, situation, perspectives, ways of
thinking, events, activities, and relationships of my participants. For example, the code understanding disability from a disability studies identity (DSID) and sub code of personal experiences with disability (and diversity) (PED) surfaced as I began to notice the similarities between the experiences and meanings made of my participants. Since the work is so closely tied to DSE theory, the codes and the coding framework that I constructed were situated and intertwined with the value participants gave to their pedagogical and theoretical stance. Although my framework continued to be further refined and modified as I delved deeper into the data while writing, overall the framework’s integrity was maintained and guided my discussion of the data in subsequent chapters. Through the IPA framework, I was able to respect and record both the collective and individualized experiences of these teachers as they navigate their identity with schools that account for their own situated context.

Through this process of analysis, I noticed the narratives that participants shared with me that they engaged within and named as DSE were largely related to the complications of translating their identities to their classroom practices, in explicit reframing and exposing work with colleagues and parents, and in maintaining their DSE identities. Overall, I constructed three large themes and numerous subthemes that I will explain more thoroughly and operationalize more fully within my subsequent data chapters.

**Researcher Role**

As a former special educator, I have had direct experience with the ways in which special education policies, practice, and understandings influence practice in public schools. These experiences continue to shape the identity I take up as a researcher. As
researchers we must always remember and take into account that all researchers “bring perspectives, assumptions and expectations to their labor that are cultural in nature and shape the work done” (Arzubiaga et al., 2008, p. 321). By remaining critical of our experiences and framing the research thoughtfully, we can proactively keep our own constructions of what we perceive our participants should be/ would be doing in check (Arzubiaga et al., 2008). As a white, able-bodied, and privileged female (with a variety of cultural capital), I myself experienced and understood the stories that were shared with me by participants through that framework for understanding. Although I attempted to create a space where my participants felt safe and comfortable to share their experiences, I know that my own intersectional identity impacted not only how I listened and responded, but how I analyzed and understood my participants’ experiences. In order to understand my own experiences in relation to my participants, as well as honor their own narratives, I attempted to engage within self-reflection, critical of the connections I made and was making to my informants throughout the collection, analysis, and writing processes (Goodnow, 2002).

By remaining critical of my own experiences and framing the research thoughtfully, I attempted to proactively keep my own constructions of what I perceived teachers should be/would be doing in check (Arzubiaga et al., 2008). Throughout the course of the study, I bracketed my understanding of my participants’ experiences and responses to the phenomena. To do this, I consistently engaged in qualitative memoing throughout the research project. Memoing provided me with space to both reflect my participants’ and my own experiences with the phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I therefore, “bracketed” my own assumptions (my worldview) throughout the course of the
study through memoing, instead of taking it for granted (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Bracketing helped me understand and unpack many of the assumptions I was making about my participants’ experiences. It helped me unearth many of the demands I placed on practicing DSE within public schools. As I described earlier, because I have a personal emotional attachment that is intimately connected to the work of my participants, I decided to include some of these brackets as asides (St. Pierre, 1997). One such example began the introduction of the dissertation. Another example highlights how I had come to think about the work my participants were engaged within and naming as DSE within their experiences.

For example, I noticed initially that many, if not most, of the participants equated disability studies practices in schools as inclusion. Participants seemed to be taking up the idea that disability studies simply meant providing services in the same room, not inclusion as transformative, but simply getting their students into general education classrooms. In my memoing I began to question what taking a DSE identity meant to me and what that meant for these participants at this time.

*Is disability studies translated as inclusion? Does disability studies in schools simply mean getting students serviced in the general education classroom?*

*Inclusion at its most elemental sense is tangible; you can see and feel it. Students nested within a class. The progress is visible and the steps toward inclusion are known, incremental in nature. It’s an understood reality, none of the theory to praxis gap that we hear all too often. I think back to my own teaching. Inclusion was the possibility. Sitting in my classroom, planning out the next steps that moved these children from my self-contained classroom into general education*
classrooms. The relationships I needed to foster. The time that those small steps would take with a teacher, an administrator, or parent. The long game that I had to engage within. At that moment, self-contained is what felt wrong to me; the isolation from the school and community; the lower(ed) expectations; the beliefs about their worthiness. Inclusion was a palpable solution to this. This was a change that I could foresee making a difference to these students, within my classroom, in my school and that is where my loyalty lied, to them at that moment and it was hard work, filled with disappointments along the way. What was I assuming my participants would see and name as the practice of disability studies in school? Does it move beyond inclusion? And if not, what moves us beyond the vital material solutions toward the intangible?

I tried to unpack my own assumptions and expectations of what taking up a DSE identity meant to me, and in relation to my participants’ own experiences with this phenomenon. I also decided to try to unpack what DSE meant to participants and during subsequent interviews asked more explicit questions about the link between disability studies and inclusion and what else disability studies meant to each individual. I believe the frequent engagement in bracketing (seen above as an aside) helped me more thoughtfully work through the data and my own subjectivity and make the meaning I conferred to my participants’ experiences with the phenomenon more transparent.

Through this deep epistemic reflexivity, I have had an opportunity to gain a deep understanding of my own and my research participants’ experiences of the phenomenon and lay the groundwork to thoroughly describe how they are utilizing their DSE identity within the pressures of the standards and accountability movement—starting to break
down hierarchical power typically associated with research. Although dynamics of power are always part of the researcher/researched experience, by making our own “consciousness an area of inquiry” (McPhail, 1995, p. 165) we are able to further explicate a fuller, more honest understanding of the research process. At the same time, by exploring my own experiences as a special education teacher within the reform era, I was able to build trust and more meaningfully document the experiences of these teachers while positioning my own subjectivity.

My experiences in schools also gave me an opportunity, as mentioned earlier, to provide some form of reciprocity to my participants through information or resources that I was able to share, discuss, and provide when the opportunity arose and was appropriate. These exchanges of support, especially for the more rookie teachers, seemed to be helpful and noninvasive. I also, through my participants, was exposed to a plethora of resources that I began to review and take up in my own practice as a teacher educator. These opportunities to share knowledge and offer support as a teacher researcher assisted in developing a shared investment between my participants and the overall research. At the same time, because I knew my own knowledge might lead to presumptions about their experience, I was cognizant and therefore diligent about centering their lived experience with the phenomena. I listened carefully and often engaged in further prompting to ensure I could make sense of their individual contexts of enacting this identity within today’s schools.

**Ethics**

Although the risks associated with the study are minimal, there did exist potential threats to confidentiality if someone were to overhear the interview or otherwise gain
access to interview responses. I minimized these risks by providing participants a choice in interview location, and when doing an interview over Skype, reminding participants to choose a safe and secure location, in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives.

In addition, to further protect individuals involved in the study, they had the right at any time to refuse to participate without penalty. During the study, participants were informed during both interviews that they could withdraw from the study without repercussion and that they did not have to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with. To further protect the privacy of individuals, pseudonyms were used for all participants, as well as for locations. All audio recordings, transcripts, and documents remain on a password-protected, secure computer.

I hope that participants experienced some benefit from taking part in the study, other than providing valuable insight into how teachers enact and maintain a DSE identity within today’s schools. As I mentioned before, if I noticed an individual was struggling with a particular issue, I offered various resources to support the individual. Through my repeated data immersion and knowledge sharing I was able to provide varying insights into resources and support they could utilize. I feel as though these interjections helped some participants become more aware of alternatives that supported and provided varying methods and tools to further enact their identity.

As within any study, the choices you make (intentionally or not) have a huge impact on what the study is able to uncover, and ultimately the story that unfolds. I hope that the story I chose to highlight, and that my participants shared graciously with me,
supports the continued conversation about what it means to practice a disability studies identity within the ever-changing landscape of today’s schools.
Participants discussed their ideas about their identities in multiple ways throughout their work as public school teachers. The stories that participants shared with me pointed to the deep and lasting impact that disability studies had on their professional identities. This was not only discussed in relation to their underlying belief systems and how they had come to understand special education, disability, and schooling from a DSE framework, but also in regard to how those constructions had significantly impacted their overall classroom pedagogy and philosophy. To these participants, DSE was a central aspect that defined who they were both personally and professionally; it therefore had a substantial effect on the choices they made on a daily basis. Noticeably, many of the narratives that were shared about identity manifested in and converged through their practice. For these participants, the space of the classroom provided nearly unlimited possibilities for identity maintenance and translation. Participants’ work within their classrooms was described as meaningful, and they were able to provide tangible examples of how they took up and named DSE within their practice. Participants felt that their classrooms were spaces that provided them room to disrupt entrenched understandings and confront underlying belief systems. This chapter will explore these explicit choices made by educators to develop spaces that were aligned with and supported their DSE identities.

Educators took up their individual DSE identities through philosophical and pedagogical choices that honored student diversity and attempted to overthrow common conceptions of smartness and ability embedded within schooling and the curriculum. In
general, this labor took place in their classrooms throughout the multiple mechanisms that they utilized to develop an environment conducive to teaching toward a pedagogy aligned with DSE. This chapter addresses those actions and DSE-aligned choices. This chapter also focuses on the complex ways in which this identity manifested in light of, and in relation to, constraints of their daily classroom life. Particularly, it focuses on the impact of the expression of this identity in relation to the pressures of the standards and accountability-based reform movement, as well as the challenges of teaching in self-contained spaces.

The chapter is divided into two major themes that are divided up into several subthemes. The first theme concerns the specific classroom work that my participants named as DSE and engaged in within their classrooms. I begin with a brief review of the experiences that informed participants’ overall belief systems and the impact those experiences had on their desire to develop a classroom culture that embodies inclusion and DSE. Although this work was often done in relation to colleagues, the manifestation of this identity was less constrained when situated within the daily practice of teaching and learning, as opposed to the reframing work that will be discussed within chapter five. The second theme explores how this identity work was challenged and made more complex in relation to the standards and accountability-based reform movement.

**Embodied belief systems and classroom practice: “Of course there was nothing wrong with them.”**

**Exposing underlying belief systems.** At a foundational level, taking up aspects of DSE meant developing classrooms that embraced many of the central tenets of inclusive pedagogy. Participants discussed how they leveraged classroom practices that
focused on inclusive philosophy, including constructivist, differentiated, and culturally relevant practices that were aligned with their pedagogical beliefs (Petersen & Hittie, 2003; Salend, 2001). This occurred to some extent across all participants whether they were working as self-contained special education teachers, resource teachers, general education teachers, or as co-teachers. Each participant expressed that a foundational tenet of a DSE identity meant adopting an inclusive perspective and attempting to incorporate an inclusive philosophy (even in spaces that were not inclusive). This framework for understanding the relationship of DSE to inclusion was due in large part to their own experiences and beliefs about the power of inclusive education in transforming attitudes and perceptions about disability.

Many of the participants had themselves been transformed by their exposure to inclusive schooling and classrooms, both in their teaching programs and within their own K-12 schooling. Ava had attended an inclusive school. Molly, Nina, Lyra, and Yvonne described their own internalization of the power of inclusive education as part of the exposure they had during their teacher education programs. Each had spent extended periods of time during teacher preparation working in and learning to teach within inclusive settings. As Nina noted, “if you can’t picture it (inclusion) in your mind and you don’t know what it’s supposed to look like, then it’s hard, but I had those experiences … I mean I have it in my mind.” The exposure to inclusive pedagogy in their lives became a personal identity marker that participants drew from as meaningful and

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1 Self-contained, resource, general education, and co-teaching classrooms are models of service delivery that lie on the current special education continuum in most states. Although they may be called by another name by a particular state or district, for students identified with special education service needs they may receive instructional services within or a variety of these service continuum placements.
significantly impacted their professional development and continuing work as educators. These experiences provided a foundation of knowing what was possible.

[Molly]: I would say my work at the Center [a DSE and inclusive project at her undergraduate institution] was just the best thing that could have happened to my career and my professional life. It really helped me become a teacher before I was a teacher … Being able to see people doing inclusion and to participate in that helped to me “get it” before I was in the field doing it … I think the work with the Center really helped me to solidify that my philosophies can be translated into practice. I think if I would have gone to teaching right after my undergraduate degree and not worked at the Center, I don’t know if I would have had the conviction to stand up to that [the system]. I don’t think I would have been able to say I’m going to buck the system a little bit…

Molly and Nina’s statements echo much of the research that has been conducted about how positive experiences and continued exposure to inclusive schools support pre-service teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about inclusive education (Beacham & Rouse, 2013; Burke & Southerland, 2003; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). In short, in order to understand inclusion as viable and necessary, you have to experience it in some way.

On the other hand, many participants located the origin of their beliefs about inclusion and DSE based on personal experiences of discrimination toward people with disabilities. These experiences sparked a belief in inclusion as a viable and necessary action to move toward civil rights. Whether based on their own experiences, those of family member(s), or their initial forays into teaching, participants (many of whom also had these significant experiences and exposure to inclusion) felt particular frustration and
disgust about the manner in which individuals with disabilities were treated in schools and communities. Instances of discrimination occurred across a variety of settings and ignited a continuing belief in the value of inclusion. Because of their relationships with individuals with disabilities, educators in this study felt a sense of frustration, sadness, and unease with the common sentiment that individuals with disabilities were less valuable or deserving of dignity, as compared with other human beings. Lyra’s brother’s schooling experiences, for instance, prompted her career decision and desire to become a teacher for children with disabilities:

The whole reason why I became a special ed. teacher was because for a very long time my brother would be educated in a closet. They hired a teacher for him. They put a TV and some magazines on a cart and they rolled it into a closet. That was his day. He just watched movies and looked at magazines all day. He lost five years of education that way. I mean from eighth grade to graduation and it made me sick. I don’t want that for these kids.

Similarly, Anna described how growing up close to her grandma helped her understand disability and discrimination and form many of her underlying beliefs:

For me, the exposure of always being around my grandma [who had post-polio syndrome and used a wheelchair] made disability and difference normal. It’s [disability] just like everything else in life … never fazed me.

And as I got older she would share stories with me that made me understand discrimination deeper. She shared with me that she was in a segregated classroom growing up because of having polio and she couldn’t walk … She said she had no
friends. That she felt really alone. Hearing those stories and trying to figure out in my head what it all meant in relation to myself, you know.

By being with her my whole life and watching people stare at her wherever we went out, and then always diverting their eyes to her. I think that stigma really influenced her and then hearing that kind of influenced me.

Like Lyra and Anna, other educators in the study witnessed and recognized the ongoing mistreatment and ingrained belief that individuals with disabilities were less worthy human beings. Their personal experiences with disability and discrimination prompted them to rethink the way society treats individuals with disabilities. Eight out of the eleven participants discussed close personal relationships with individuals with disabilities that strongly influenced their underlying commitment to inclusion. This finding expands Hodge & Jansma’s (1999) previous research claim that educators who had direct personal or professional contact with individuals with disabilities were more likely to have positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, as well as a desire to include students, as opposed to educators who never had such contact. These values were reinforced and bolstered through participants’ exposure and experiences with DSE.

For many of the participants in the study, DSE served to confirm their underlying beliefs about disability and special education. Participants who had previous experiences with individuals with disabilities and participants who have disabilities themselves questioned what had been constructed as commonsense understanding about disability and the efficacy of special education. DSE offered a solution and organizing framework to affirm and consolidate participants’ lived experiences. I myself experienced a similar trajectory when coming to know disability studies, and since many of our conversations
were dialogical, I felt comfortable sharing the beginning of my own critical consciousness regarding disability with many of my participants when this issue came up naturally in our interviews. For example, I briefly shared my own experience with Erika after she had described her own critical consciousness raising experience around DSE in relation to her students and her own two children:

Carrie: I had a very similar experience. I was a self-contained high school teacher and when I was teaching I couldn’t figure out why we were treating these kids in these ways. I felt like there was this underlying marginalization, but I didn’t have the language to understand what it meant and why I was feeling this way. When I found disability studies, it really helped me figure out how to talk about these things in a meaningful way and with other people. It gave me a way to try to dissect why I was feeling this way and how that feeling related to how we think about disability.

[Erika]: Well basically you can write down what you just said because that’s exactly what I’m trying to say. And that’s actually what it did. And now being two-and-a-half years out, I can see how my attitude and my knowledge has changed, where I’m affecting people in a way that I never did. It made me mindful. I think that’s the only word I can really describe. Well okay two things: It made me mindful of everything I did and said and how I was teaching people through my language and my action; It also had me begin to have a compassion for people that didn’t believe the same way. Because learning about medical versus social and all of that, learning disability theory gave me a great way to talk to people about getting frustrated. The book, “Nothing About Us Without Us”
gave me a great way to talk to people without getting frustrated. It also helped me to not assume that everyone knows anything about disability studies. I forget that not everyone’s been there.

Many of my participants’ experiences of coming to know DSE mirrored these sentiments. DSE gave them the language to understand what they had previously felt and it was a turning point for their identities as pre-service and practicing teachers. Furthermore, coming to know and situating disability and special education within a DSE lens provided a foundation for and substantiated many of their underlying beliefs. Erika shared her own experience coming to know disability and special education from a DSE perspective. She described DSE as giving her the means to talk about disability and “support her kids without pushing others away.” Having the underlying concepts and language of DSE to both reassign and confirm their own belief systems became a powerful narrative that educators took up in relation to their identities as teachers. Their personal histories with inclusion and individuals who have disabilities affirmed a core awareness of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. As Erika exclaimed, “two-and-a-half years out” was the date of her own transformational shift and adoption of both naming and taking up DSE as part of her personal and professional identity.

Eric recalled his own rationalization of what coming to know DSE meant in relation his own developing DSE identity:

DSE just fit with me. Here’s the thing. I would say the school district’s philosophy is the special education doctrine. I think I have been, and [am] increasingly becoming, in conflict with that. And I think with disability studies, what I found was all the things that I disagreed with, disability studies does too. I
don’t want to say a common enemy but it was kind of how I define myself and the things that I was against and working towards … And what DSE agreed with, I agreed with. It just made sense to me. It fit … if anything I think disability studies has made me think more about my place within the system. I guess the tension that I feel. I know one mindset is to just look at what are the changes that you can make within the system. At the same time conversely to that is my presence in that system is inclusively sustaining that system.

DSE provided Eric with a substantiation of his underlying personal belief system. The tenets that laid the foundation for DSE corresponded and were aligned with his own professional and personal commitments. It also provided him with a framework for understanding his position within the system and his ability to work within the system, while still being a part of and sustaining it. Similarly, Angela described making sense of DSE within her own framework for understanding: “I don’t think I looked at discrimination [of individuals with disabilities] as so broad. I don’t think I looked at it as big. I didn’t see how pervasive it was, that marginalizing of the kids in special education.” Anna also described coming to understand disability and special education from a DSE lens as a reawakening that shifted her own beliefs and shifted her from “standing straight up to standing on [her] head. You know it [DSE] completely flips you upside down. You have to think about how what you are doing is either reaffirming or challenging those notions.” All of the participants shared similar moments of illumination that came from being exposed to disability studies theory. Thus, embedding concepts of inclusion and DSE in participants’ practice became the physical manifestation of professional identity.
Practicing inclusion and DSE became tangible environmental and civil rights solutions that could be taken up to honor all students’ varying and diverse abilities, as well as break down the marginalization they perceived as inherent to special and public education. DSE and inclusion, therefore, offered an alternative discourse to the commonsense notions embedded within schooling and provided participants with a way to maintain their identities, which I elaborate on throughout this chapter. Through DSE, participants were provided with a language, discourse, and organizational vehicle to trouble dominant notions of ability and commonsense that included teaching about and using practices that valued difference and diversity (Kumashiro, 2009). To them, the classroom became a literal space to practice their DSE commitments.

When first queried about their daily classroom practice, educators began by solely describing this work within the limits of inclusive pedagogy. That is to say that much of the work they described within their classroom included and was limited to providing access to the general education classroom and content to students who were typically segregated. Specific classroom work that politicized disability within the sociocultural framework, and scrutinized ableist tendencies remained absent from our conversations. However, further prompting and discussion exposed more fluid pedagogical choices that moved beyond best practices of inclusion toward elements that they specifically attributed to their DSE identities. A core tenet of DSE is inclusion (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011; Routel, 2013). Nonetheless, because of the nature of the study and the dearth of literature that describes how teachers within K-12 actually take up and practice a DSE identity within today’s classrooms, I will describe and expose more pronounced aspects of participants’ practice that they described as specifically enacting a DSE orientation.
Although some researchers might argue that the practices I discuss could be assigned as inclusive, the educators in the study continually assigned and named these aspects of their classroom practice as DSE. Participants utilized their daily interactions with students and colleagues to move toward more transformative aspects of inclusion, which I will describe below.

**Disability as a social construct: Presuming Competence.** Since participants viewed the system of schooling as both problematic and limited, they worked to alter their own practices to reflect and break down the assumptive forces surrounding intelligence and independence that have created barriers to access for individuals, labeled or not. Eric described how he understood the social construction of disability in relation to his work as a teacher:

To me disability is very contextual. In certain settings students are at a disadvantage. If the setting is altered, I mean they [my students] can have a chance to flourish. To me I always looked at learning differences as opposed to disabilities. And as a teacher if you can adjust to meet those needs, then you can get the kids to succeed.

As Eric exhibits, coming to know disability as a social construct reaffirmed participants’ beliefs that altering their own teaching practices could assist their students in reaching their individual potential, through knowing the students, their strengths, and their individual needs (Kasa-Hendrickson & Buswell, 2007). Participants understood public schooling and special education as part of the socio-cultural framework and altered their classroom practices to resist and subvert underlying systems of dominance that proliferate within schools (Ashby, 2012; Valle & Connor, 2011). In essence, they used
their classrooms as spaces to destabilize practices that were named as commonsense and that reproduced particular notions of smartness and ability.

Participants did not overly rely on the medical model, but instead attempted to situate disability as a way of being and as a unique aspect of each of their students’ identities (Gabel & Danforth, 2006). This stance afforded them an opportunity to center their practices on their students and engage in reflective problem solving to support the varying strengths, needs, backgrounds, and cultures of their students. Erika stated that coming to know disability studies from the socio-cultural framework had a significant impact on her practice: “I changed the way that I have been responding to them [students with disabilities] and teaching them … we [her and paraprofessionals] have all decided that the kids are first and we have put all ourselves aside.” Even though a vast array of educational literature points to student-centered practices and continuous and ongoing reflection as a core aspect of teaching (see for example: Landorf, 2007; Walkington, 2005), the ideological stance sits at the core of DSE (Ashby, 2012; Jordan & Stanovich, 2007; Landorf et al., 2007). Amelia recalled an early situation within her career that established and affirmed her belief that it was not her students who needed to be altered or disciplined, but herself:

I taught two classes of English and history. And one of my classes had eighteen students, right? Out of eighteen students I had nine who were labeled with learning disabilities and four became labeled through that year. And I of course had no training in like anything at this point; it was before I pursued my masters. I’m literally bouncing off the wall. I didn’t know what to do. I decided to go to my mentor, my assigned mentor, and I was like “Okay what do
I do?” And he handed me this stack of books on discipline and classroom management. There were five thick books. I remember putting them at the edge of my desk, looking at them, not cracking them and knowing that the answers were not in those [books]. I just felt like, “No it wasn’t about their discipline, these were really smart kids. And the problem isn’t with them, it’s with me.” I don’t know how to teach them in a way that they’re learning. Because they’re smart and it’s not their fault. Somehow I just knew that it wasn’t about that…

And after enrolling in my master’s program, I really connected that experience with the idea of disability as a social construct. It connected exactly with what I felt was true, which of course was that there was nothing wrong with them. You know it wasn’t their fault.

Instead of placing the locus of blame on her students for their “bad” or undisciplined behavior, Amelia presumed that the “problem” lay in how she chose to teach, “I don’t know how to teach in a way that they’re learning.” Like Amelia, the majority of participants stated that it was their responsibility to alter and adapt their own practices to support their students’ continued access and success in the classroom, as opposed to measuring success with their students’ assimilation, efficiency, and mastery of prescribed norms and expectations that the teacher (the district/state etc.) predetermined. Participants attempted to disrupt and reframe the social and cultural contexts that had become known as schooling (Taylor, 2006). In order to create a classroom culture that was based on a social constructivist stance, participants altered their own practices to support their developing DSE identities.
Foremost, in order to affirm that there was not a singular way of being or teaching, educators in this study used their understanding of schooling as socially constructed to position their students as capable learners. This conceptualization acted in tandem with and bolstered an understanding of educators’ presumption that their students were competent. Situating the processes of schooling as socially constructed provided participants with an occasion to challenge presumptions of “incompetence.” As Kliewer, Biklen, & Petersen (2015) state, “The idea of presuming competence asks us to adopt an alternative orientation; the construct is a reminder that the responsibility for student learning demands an ideology of open possibility, hopeful communities, and determined, engaged educators” (p. 23). In the example above, Amelia presumed the competence of her students as “smart kids,” whom she was not reaching. She had to engage in active problem solving. The onus of responsibility was on her to change to meet her students’ needs. In a similar vein, Angela noted how she worked with her paraprofessional to reframe deficit discourses about a particular student and move toward honoring this competence stance:

I am constantly looking for different ways to enable a student to understand a concept … but it’s been a problem I’ve actually had with my instructional assistant this year a little bit. You know she keeps saying that it’s the student’s fault because he’s not … or he can’t learn this because … you know, and so it’s continually trying to look at how we are presenting the material.

Participants engaged in critical self-reflection and problem solving to change their practices to meet their students’ needs (Kliewer, Biklen & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006). This provided participants with a framework for understanding that created a space in
which they could remain open to varying and alternative possibilities for student behavior, communication, and demonstrations of ability.

Participants attempted to instill this presumption of competence stance within their classrooms. That is to say that even if students’ abilities, language, backgrounds, cultures, or behaviors did not fit within what had been prescribed as normal, they did not assume that the students were not capable or competent human beings. Molly discussed how the stance of presuming competence served as a foundation for her classroom relationship with her paraprofessionals:

I think one of the biggest things that I’ve had to tackle is the presumption of competence with my kids, especially with my paraprofessionals. They [her paraprofessionals] often assume that they [her students] don’t understand … I don’t know … I was talking to one of the students that I’ll get next year. He’s in pre-school. And I was “Colton, how you doing buddy,” and she [the paraprofessional] goes “He doesn’t know what you’re saying.” And I go “I just want to know how Colton’s doing,” and then I started to talk to Colton again. I think the biggest thing that I’ve tried to do in my classroom is starting from a presumption of competence. Let’s assume first, that they know what we’re talking about. Talk to them like we would talk to any other first grader.

A few minutes later, Molly returned to this idea:

I try to do a lot of modeling, like with Colton. I just really hope that through modeling that they get it [to presume competence]. For the most part, I think the associates that I have now get that. They try to come from a place of trying to understand the communicative intent and valuing that.
We have a little guy with a Dynavox; he just got it. He’s exploring it and I’m just going to tell you, it’s annoying because he says rooster like seven times in a row but he’s really exploring his device. He’s kind of in that exploratory you know use of the language. We try to value the things that he says and I now hear my associates doing that same thing.

Although at times this was a struggle, as Molly described in the first excerpt, retaining fidelity to this belief was paramount to breaking down assumptions about individuals with disabilities. Her modeling of presuming competence seemed to have had some effect on the manner in which her paraprofessionals were responding to students. Shifting the discourse about Colton and other students through this continued work set up an opportunity for other individuals to see students as competent, capable, and valued members of the classroom and community (Kliewer et al., 2015). Norman also described his framework for understanding his students that started from a presumption of competence:

When I talk with parents, when I talk with teachers, when I’m in IEP meetings, in my classroom … we’re really looking at what the student can do and wants to do. What are their interests and how can we build on those interests, and how can we help that student move in that direction? Because that’s what we would do with a typical child, you know. Why should we treat a child with a disability any differently? The children with disabilities have those same needs, those same wants...

Norman began from a place that assumed that all children, disabled or not, have wants, needs, and desires. By positioning his students as similarly abled to their peers, he
worked to break down assumptions about disability by individuals who might believe otherwise. Participants described again and again how they attempted to create classroom environments that presumed the competence of all learners within their classroom. In order to support this stance, each individual educator described their attempts to develop a dynamic and shifting classroom culture and curriculum that brought focus to the diversity and differences of learners as normal within their classrooms.

Creating a classroom culture for diversity, difference, and support.

Cultivating a classroom culture that both supported and valued student diversity (in all its varied forms) was a central goal of participants’ DSE classroom work. For participants, key aspects of this belief system were clear and unambiguous conversations about difference, diversity, and differentiation within their classrooms. Part of their praxis centered on, as Baglieri & Knopf (2004) state, “Creating an environment in which the discourse of difference positions all students and their myriad differences as positive, ‘normal,’ and even enriching is a critical step toward reconceptualizing and restructuring schools” (p. 526). In order to regularize difference, educators attempted to create a positive discourse that centered on the diversity of learners through continued and reflective dialogue on fairness and equity throughout various aspects of the classroom. That is to say that educators gave particular value to the belief that fairness meant that everyone receives what is needed and not necessarily that everyone receives the same thing (Welch, 2000). For example, Lyra described her use of this framework with her students:

[Lyra]: I talked to my students themselves about this, I’ve got a kid who is really attention dependent and they [the students] get really frustrated with him. I’ll say
“he doesn’t understand yet, how to get attention in positive ways and we can help him by ignoring him when he does this. Give him attention when he does that.”

Carrie: Do you see the kids following through with that when you’re talking to them about that in utilizing those cues?

[Lyra]: Yeah, maybe not right away but I do see them trying.

Carrie: And recognizing that this is what this kid needs.

[Lyra]: Yeah, yeah. I have the whole … I found this really great picture. It was the equality versus fairness image.

Carrie: Was it the steps one?

[Lyra]: Yeah. I showed that picture to them and it was a really good way to illustrate what I have been talking about. So if one of them says ‘well that’s not fair’, you know I’ll say ‘the steps, remember the steps.’ And they still are grouchy about it. They still don’t quite get it but it’s a step.

This tenet laid the foundation for a classroom culture that provided varying and multiple aspects of support to students with and without disabilities. Many participants reported beginning every year by explaining this concept to their students—using the well-known steps image (see attachment 2 on page below) to hone in on students’ adoption and understanding of equity, equality, and fairness. The normalization of classroom support and instruction that was differentiated was accomplished through open and ongoing dialogue with students and colleagues. Although this may be conflated with individualized instruction\(^2\) (a term that has been a hallmark of traditional special

\(^2\) Individualized instruction (sometimes termed specialized instruction) is a term that has become heavily embedded in special education to describe the individualized programming, accommodations, modifications, and learning goals that are part of the Individualized Education Plan for students identified as eligible for special education
education practice), I hesitate to utilize the term “individualized instruction” because it has often been taken up to rationalize students’ placement within segregated settings (Brantlinger, 2009). I would argue that instead, participants provided personalized instruction. Molenda (2009) describes personalized instruction “as provid[ing] a holistic learning environment featuring frequent and close personal associations among students and teachers, with emphasis on collaborative groups and authentic assessment” (p. 14). I contend that educators in the study utilized personalized instruction to create a culture within their classrooms that regularized accommodations and adaptations to the varying and diverse needs of their students (Ferguson & Nussbaum, 2012). As Lyra recalled:

I said to their gen ed peers, “Do you know how I can’t see without my glasses? Sometimes I am the glasses for Dayquan when he’s having trouble figuring out how to control himself. Ms. Dewpane is his glasses.”

Attachment 2: Steps Image

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services. Broadly speaking, NYS defines individualized instruction as a method of instruction in which there is one-to-one teaching and self-paced learning based on an outline of progressive goals leading to the course/curriculum objectives (http://www.acces.nysed.gov/bpss/schools/pg160301.htm).
As Lyra exhibited, providing individualized accommodations and adaptations to support individual student needs, including behavior, was accomplished through systematic dialogue that both involved the students and led to a conceptualization of accommodations and adaptations as normal and positive aspects (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004). Providing personalized instruction was positioned in much the same way as Lyra’s glasses, a commonly known and accepted accommodation to support an individual need.

Ongoing dialogue around difference, including support, was most often accomplished through educators’ engagement in explicit discussion with students about what fairness and equity meant and looked like. Yvonne recalled an instance wherein she described varying individual accommodations to explicitly discuss the diversity of each learner:

You know I had one kid who was ED and he had a break pass, and you know he would get to take a break when he needed to take a break and the other kids were frustrated, they didn’t think it was fair. So I had the conversation with them that everything is not going to be exactly equal, because that is not fair to what each person in this class needs to be successful. And I was like that’s not something that you need. You are able to sit in the classroom and be here, while we’re going through the whole lesson and that’s a great thing, and I’m happy, but he may need a break in between what we’re doing. So someone might get one thing they need and you might get another, but if you need something than I’m going to make sure I give you what you need.
Although in this instance, Yvonne positions the break pass as particular to the student and his individual need(s), she does not reduce the availability of accommodations or support as restricted to particular students. She instead frames support as readily available to all students: “if you need something I’m going to make sure I give you what you need.” Participants spent significant time reflecting on how they utilized their own practice to de-stigmatize notions of difference in order to provide natural supports that were perceived as “normal” aspects of the classroom. Although at times students questioned differential treatment as “unfair,” educators used these instances as “teachable moments” to engage in mutual reciprocal dialogue about differing individual needs, strengths, and backgrounds as part of the classroom community. Ava describes one such encounter with her students:

[Ava]: We get to be really friendly, very close, and I can lay it all out there. In general education classrooms, for example when Zack, one of my students was having a hard day with his ADHD and blurt ing out, he was really annoying and frustrating another student. So I gave Zack the headphones and the same student was like I want headphones too. I told that other student, I said, “You know you know Zack has ADHD, right? Do you know what that means?” He said, “kind of” and then him and I had a quick conversation. I reminded him that, “Zack needs the headphones” and told him “I know you can do the work without the headphones.” I also told him that, “Maybe one day we can try it and everybody can have headphones. But right now I only have four headphones and Zack is one of the kids who absolutely needs to have a pair to get him focused. You’ve been doing great.” He was like “I understand now,” he got it. So I’ll have these little
conversations on the side with kids who are not understanding why a kid is acting a particular way or feeling a particular way, or why they were getting something and they weren’t. So we’ll have a conversation and remind them of fair versus equal. I might ask the student, is fair everybody gets the same thing or everybody gets what they need? Everybody gets what they need.

Carrie: Do you say that a lot?

[Ava]: Yeah … I’m the one driving that idea of helping the students to understand why a kid might be having an outburst? Why a kid is getting to go to the bathroom all the time? Why a kid might have water and I don’t? Whatever it might be … Last year I had a student, she had a 504 plan but she would have outbursts. She had an Asperger’s label but she was also struggling with some emotional stuff as well. So she had a lot of triggers where she would interpret things as being against her, and she would kind of lash out at the kids. Sometimes she would be physical and then I would remind the kids that she is reacting this way because she feels that … I would just explain what was going on to the kids and they were like “oh, I get it now, thanks for telling me instead of like the hush-hush.” You know I think they respect it more when you’re real with them and let them know what’s going on … She’s different than you and you’re different from her, but that’s okay.

As Ava demonstrated, these discussions were not used as mechanisms of exercising authoritative power over the students, but instead these were genuine opportunities for critical exchanges about notions of diversity and difference that brought about varied and collective learning. It was okay to accomplish tasks in differing ways, while using
differing supports. At the same time, it was normal to have outbursts. As Ava described, it was just about being “real with them and let[ting] them know what’s going on.” Engaging in open and authentic dialogue provided educators an opportunity to begin critical conversations with their students about the relative diversity of all learners and to remove the stigma from difference (Peters & Reid, 2009). While Ava chose to engage with the varying and different needs of her students at the forefront, she did so through a medicalized explanation of difference. Zack needed headphones because of ADHD, not simply because that is how she knew that he learned best. By leveraging ADHD as the rationality for Zack’s necessity of headphones, she spoke directly into the framework she was attempting to disrupt. Could Ava have simply stated that Zack needed the headphones to be successful? Or did she feel like she had to rely on his disability to justify Zack’s need for headphones? Nevertheless, by choosing to embed notions of equity and fairness into her practice, she further disrupts some of the silence (and silencing) that is typically associated with providing diverse, differentiated, and varied adaptations and accommodations (Ferguson & Nussbaum, 2012). By fostering a classroom environment that provided mutual investment in a culture and language that supported difference as part of natural human variation, Ava helped reassign boundaries around intelligence, productivity, and citizenship. Participants’ described the use of personalized instruction, which included differentiation and multiple points of access, to validate their belief and value systems. Personalization also served as a tool to disrupt notions of equity and sameness and to promote interdependency, collaboration, and mutual support. These intentional actions were practiced across a variety of settings and in myriad ways.
In addition, the ideas called forth during these explicit conversations about collaboration and support extended beyond the students within the class toward the needs of all individuals, including participants. After returning to work in the fall, Amelia discussed a conversation she had with students about her own needs within the classroom after the recent physical manifestation of her disability:

At the beginning of that year I had to say to the students “I’ll probably ask for a tremendous amount of help this year. You guys are going to have to do stuff for me because I cannot physically do it. I can’t shut the door, and I can’t get up and bend down if I drop something. I said here’s the deal. You know I’m going to ask you for help and I need you to ask me for help.” It was kind of a neat way to begin our relationship. I think if I left out that bummer stuff, not sharing that with the kids it would make me disingenuous. Plus, I feel like these are the kids who also struggle; it’s not that I am trying to make myself vulnerable, but showing them that we all need help makes me vulnerable … But I feel like the kids are really great at adapting and I knew they would be. I knew that they would be just fine helping me, that they would get it, and that they would roll with it. They’re much more resilient and adaptable and open to new ideas than I think we often give them credit for.

Although for Amelia part of the goal of this conversation was to be honest about her own needs with her students, the exchange itself points to notions of her classroom as a space for collaboration and support, both for students and the teacher. As a teacher, she needs personal support during the course of the day, just as her students do. Her invitation, “I need you to ask me for help” recognized that all individuals are part of systems of
interdependence, not independent actors in the class. This notion of interdependency positions the human condition as reliant on vulnerability and partnerships, not individual ability (Reindal, 2008). It is important to note that although Amelia had used similar discourse with her students in the past (specifically about student support and collaboration), this was one of the first instances she had openly discussed her own specific support needs and limitations in relation to her disability with her students. Not only did students need to support and collaborate with one another, but with her as well. Further, she also recognized that it is typically not the students who are opposed to these ideas as “they are much more resilient and adaptable and open to new ideas,” but rather that obstacles to these structures lie either outside of the classroom itself or with the adults who are invested in traditional ideas about independence and meritocracy.

Within classes that were exclusively segregated and solely serviced students with disabilities, educators described using teaching activities that attempted to position disability as an element of identity and in relation to self-advocacy. Ava discussed how this phenomenon manifested within her resource classroom through an IEP scavenger hunt and a classroom contract:

I want them to understand what their IEP says. We go through all the pieces of it [their IEP] and when we get to their individual goals I say this is what we’re working on together as a class. Here it says you need support in reading but somebody else might have just math, or somebody might have organization and emotional work that they have to work on, but we’re all here to work on that together. You might be confused why we aren’t all doing the same thing. That whole spiel.
This year I had them sign a contract that said we’re going to support each other in this room. We talked about this class being a safe space—that what we discuss is private unless the student sharing gives you permission to share it outside of the room. I let them know that we were going to talk about our struggles and your struggles may not be their struggles, but we’re not here to make fun.

When I was working with some kids in resource, one of them needed a little more time to process. We were working together on math, and they started answering questions for her. I told them “She needs that extra time because it’s harder for her.” And then at some point, it kind of went from me advocating for her to her explaining it to the kids herself. She would say something like ‘I’m not so great at Math but that’s okay I’m better at drawing and writing.’

I did that again this year with kids. I don’t know if it’s because I introduced it so early or that they’re just totally different bunch of kids, but they had an easier time jumping right in and being supportive with each other. They didn’t question difference so much, I noticed them saying “Oh that student doesn’t like to read out loud” and “it’s okay if she reads to herself. It’s okay if Miss B goes back and reads one-on-one with her while we read together.” They don’t get angry or cranky, it just is.

Not only did Ava’s classroom practice and culture expand notions of varied and differentiated support as collaborative, but she used her classroom space to support students’ understanding of disability (individually and collectively) not as an area to be ashamed of, but as a natural part of human variation (Björnsdóttí, 2010; Connor, 2008). She and her students engaged in a reframing of disability partially by re-assigning terms
typically perceived as negative, including struggling and difference. Second, students’ recognition and acceptance of individual and collective differences in ability (“they didn’t question difference so much”) point to their initial attempts to break down ableist tendencies and dismantle presumptions about ability (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferguson & Ferguson, 2008). By fostering an environment that offered real and meaningful opportunities for her students to engage with disability as an aspect of identity, Ava helped begin “a revolution in self-perception, [where her students] no longer see their physical and mental limitations as a source of shame or as something to overcome…” (Shapiro, 1994, p. 4). Finally, since Ava naturalized difference by being explicit with her students (“she needs extra time…”), students in her class were afforded consistent opportunities to get to know their disabilities and advocate for themselves. Activities like these were used to help reassign disability as an aspect of identity that was neither positive nor negative.

Participants hoped that these types of activities would also unearth and deconstruct negative perceptions that had been internalized by students that something was either wrong with them or that they were in some way abnormal as opposed to their peers. Educators utilized these teaching points to provide a space to expose an alternative narrative about disability for individual students. This classroom practice also expanded students’ frameworks of support and interdependence specifically toward disability.

By embedding a deep commitment to and critical conversations about notions of equity and fairness in their classrooms, educators worked to create spaces that resisted competitive and non-collaborative notions of schooling. In so doing, they also
operationalized and embraced critical literacies that led to a classroom culture of diversity, interdependency, and collaboration.

**Explicit instructive strategies that attempted to trouble commonsense.**

Paramount to the participants’ classroom identity work was the development of instructional methods that focused on recognizing and responding to difference as a natural part of human existence. Within their classrooms, they attempted to draw on culturally responsive practices that espoused the diversity of all students and drew from various discourses to disrupt traditional ideas that continue to dominate teaching and schooling (Rice, 2008; Valle & Connor, 2011). Educators in this study accomplished this by attempting to embed differentiation and culturally relevant pedagogy into multiple aspects of their classrooms to make space for all students to be supported to learn in a manner that was meaningful to them. They utilized these teaching strategies to maintain allegiance to their DSE identities. Eric, who formerly held the position of a “differentiation teacher,” for instance, spoke candidly about an example of differentiation he used within his classroom, as well as the importance of varied and multiple means of learning/teaching in disrupting notions of normalcy and value:

I would say that the tangible thing with normalcy is providing students with meaningful options that maintain high expectations. With the research projects I gave kids, you know, we had the option of doing a traditional research paper, but there were other options that were presented there too; Options that would allow them to show other intelligences and let them show other skills. We read “A Night to Remember,” which described the sinking of the Titanic. One of the

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3 As a differentiation teacher, Eric provided professional development and in class support to teachers within his school in practicing differentiated instruction.
products that they had to choose from was creating a model of the Titanic.

Embedded in that model or along with that model they also had to code different areas in the ship with certain passages from the novel, essentially they had to tell why those specific areas and hence by association those specific points in the text were important.

Originally, the kids who chose to do that project wanted to create a diorama, you know a very simplistic model because that’s what they’re used to. That’s what they do in elementary school. But the products, even though they showcase various intelligences and strengths, also have to maintain similar expectations. You know, the students are adding many more layers to the project, making it more sophisticated, and eventually tying it back to the analysis of the text. But that’s one of the ways you can challenge what’s normal is and what has value.

To me normalcy and value are tied together. Normal has value. Anything that’s not normal doesn’t have value usually from the way people view it. You have to get the kids to see that writing a research paper has as much merit, as creating that model. In other words there’s not … usually with normal there’s one way of doing things. By incorporating differentiation, you’re trying to get across to the kids that there’s multiple ways in which you can present things and they’re all (valid) and I guess that makes it more it become more normal.

Eric, like others in the study, described his use of differentiation as a means to maintain and perform his pedagogical stance and disrupt notions of ability that have been assigned to certain methods of exhibiting intelligence. For instance, Eric’s choice to provide multiple differentiated options for the research assignment that still maintained its
integrity was a mechanism that allowed him to enact his pedagogical stance (Tomlinson, 1999). By attaching worth and value to the multiple ways in which students can exhibit their intelligence (through differentiation), Eric believed he was reassigning what normalcy meant. The use of these pedagogical methods provided him with an opportunity to enact his practice in a way that embraced varying notions of smartness and ability outside of what has been assigned as markers of intelligence within the existing culture of testing and achievement (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). All participants described the utilization of differentiation within their classroom practices as a means to support the diversity of all learners. Establishing classroom mechanisms that honored and made room for non-stigmatized individualization and differentiation was accomplished in a variety of manners to support engagement with the curriculum in ways that were meaningful to students and their own identities as teachers.

Participants also shared instances in which they provided specific learning opportunities to teach their students about understanding individual differences and backgrounds in relation to their underlying DSE belief systems. In particular, educators wanted their students to understand that different modes of learning, language, and communication did not hold a weighted value, but instead could be regarded as forms of diversity (Hehir, 2005). Erika described a strategy she utilized to help support her students and their peers to understand and see value in alternative forms of communication:

A big way we do this is through our language and action. We teach those kids, our typical peers in our classroom, we teach the general ed kids and the general ed teachers, how to speak to their kids to learn how to be with my kids [her students
who use AAC devices]. When we mainstream with the general ed. class, we have kids that will go, grab our kids, take their hands, and pull them or something they are holding away. I try to use these as moments to talk to the kids, I go, “You know she doesn’t know how to talk, so why don’t you say can I have that and see what she says.” Then, the child will say “Can I have that?” and the kid looks at him like holding it closer. I ask the student, “What do you think she’s saying with her body part?” They’ll say I think “She’s saying no.” And I’m like “You’re right. Why do you think she’s saying that?” He goes because “she wants it and she’s holding it.” I’m like “That is right, so maybe don’t grab it. She’s saying no, so you have to say, oh you’re telling me no Jordan. I’ll try it again later.” We try to show them what to do. We give them the actions. We give them the language.

Erika used instances like this in her classroom to explicitly teach peers about communication that is not singularly defined by speech. Erika facilitated a critical exchange that supported students’ conceptualization of communication not as the singular action of speaking in order to express that the student who was nonverbal had a “voice” and desires just as the other student. By modeling this language (along with as, Erika suggests, “the actions”) to begin to deconstruct and diversify students’ understanding of communication, Erika supported the development of these differences as notable aspects of interaction. By engaging in explicit conversations that encourage students’ recognition of varied forms of communication outside of what is considered as normal educators provided students with an understanding of difference that transcended the assimilationist discourse; where one way of being was not “right” or “better”, as opposed to another (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004).
Participants also discussed their commitment to de-stigmatizing difference by reassigning the boundaries of value within the classroom. They often worked to de-center a certain kind of knowledge that has been privileged (the commonsense curriculum of schooling) by incorporating and utilizing their students’ backgrounds and experiences as expert and privileged knowledge. Yvonne’s centering and reconceptualization of “smartness” with a student who was ashamed of his home language exemplified this:

But as far as just reframing, we have a student in my class that is from Dominican Republic and he speaks Spanish. He doesn’t want to go to ESL class or use Spanish in class because he feels like it separates him. But we try to talk about it in a more positive way. That it isn’t something to be ashamed of. The kids in the class think it’s so cool that he speaks Spanish and we have tried to show him that. For example, there was a story that had Spanish language embedded in it and we’re like “Oh what’s that mean?” At first, he was apprehensive, but eventually he told us.

One of the paraprofessionals in the room, she speaks Spanish, so every once in a while she’ll speak to him in Spanish; the other kids are so curious, they ask what does that mean, what is this, what is that? We try to position his second language not just as something that sets him apart in a negative way. [We] let him know that it’s really an asset. You speak two languages, that’s great. Sometimes I tell the kids like oh my goodness I wish I could speak another language. That’s so wonderful. I ask him about words too. But just trying to reframe that speaking Spanish, having two languages, that’s something that separates him but that isn’t a
bad thing, it’s something that we could all learn from and that’s really, really
great.

Yvonne privileged the diversity of her students’ backgrounds and attempted to disrupt the
negative value and stereotypes that the student attached to being different from his peers.
She attempted to situate this aspect of diversity as a sense of advantage, pride, and
empowerment, as opposed to something to be remedied or remediated (Rice, 2008;
Thompson, 2011; Ware, 2005). Nonetheless, the student was still asked to leave the
classroom to learn English. Although Yvonne, like the rest of the participants, attempted
to support the diversity of her students by embedding varying notions within the
classroom and curriculum, many of the institutionalized structures present within the
schools contributed to the continued marginalization of students. Yvonne’s student still
had to leave class to learn the dominant language and students in her school were still
serviced within segregated settings, including many students who were identified with
emotional disabilities. Although many of the teachers in this study used their role to
position difference as an asset within their classrooms, there were concrete boundaries to
enacting this identity. Their locus of control and sphere of influence was limited to this
type of identity work. Although Yvonne valued her students’ differences, she still had to
contend with the contexts of her school and the larger social context that did not align
with her valuing of difference.

Lyra faced a similar constraint on her DSE identity work in relation to the
material consequences of disability and race (Epstein & Gist, 2013). Lyra described how
she positioned her student’s emotional disability in relation to her own teaching choices:
Like I said, the reason why I really like my job is because my students are who they are. Ms. Dewpane isn’t going to change that. Mrs. Heffner isn’t going to change that. They are who they are. I really love being a part of that. I try to let them know that that part of who they are is good thing that you know, speaking up and back shows courage. But to me another critical piece is teaching them to follow the rules, you know, if I want my students to be those game changers and avoid prison time, avoid suspension, dropping out, I feel like I have to teach them those social skills. You know I want them to know that it’s good that you’re questioning your teacher. It’s good that you are thinking differently … it’s good that you have ADHD for a lack of a better word because you can get a lot done, but I need you to learn some social skills so that you can use those skills that you have effectively.

Although Lyra began by calling attention to her students’ behavior as a significant aspect of their individual identities that she appreciated and valued (“they are who they are. I really love being a part of that”), she also discussed her students’ identities in tandem with a competing discourse of her own fears and responsibilities to these students. As Lyra pointed out, there are serious biases that have led to disproportionate consequences (prison time, suspension, dropping out) that continue to threaten the lives of her students. Although she affirmed the aspects of their disabilities that could be construed as positive, she nonetheless felt as though she must teach them to act in a certain way (“social skills”) to avoid many of the consequences that have become a reality regarding being black and labeled.
These participants understood the material reality of social bias and institutionalized racism and ableism that would undoubtedly affect the lives of these children (Fenton, 2014). Although educators embraced students’ disabilities as part of their identities, this idea was made complicated by their responsibility to prepare them for the world that we currently live in. Lyra’s understanding that the material structures that make up and threaten aspects of her students’ identities are valuable pushed her to teach toward certain ways of being in order to continue to provide access and attempt to avoid the institutionalized oppression tied to their intersectional identities (Lorsen & Orfield, 2002). Therefore, teaching in a way that honored difference as positive was often accomplished at the margins of her practice, as students still had to learn and follow the rules of the dominant culture or engage in “code switching” as Lyra exhibited (Delpit, 1988). The students’ identities make them who they are but can also lead them into situations that may prove harmful. Educators in the study felt a responsibility to teach students how to be within institutions that didn’t place value on these differences (Epstein & Gist, 2013). Although participants attempted to deconstruct negative stereotypes and celebrate the diversity that their students brought to the classroom by centering difference as a positive and valuable aspect, they also had to weigh the material costs and benefits of not teaching students how to be in the current world we live in. Further attempts to reconstruct and teach toward disability also manifested through participants’ desire to have authentic and honest “round about” conversations with their students about the concept of disability itself.

Within general education settings, participants also took up and discussed notions of difference with their students without directly naming as disability. Participants
attempted to reposition disability outside of deficit discourses at both individual and class-level discussions, as Lyra discussed:

But as far as saying to them the reason why you’re lacking these social skills is because maybe there’s something going on in your brain … you know I don’t go that deep into it but I do have a unit which is more on social skills where we look at images where it looks like a man but if you look at it a different way it becomes like a woman or something like that.

We look at those optical illusions and I say, “okay our brains are like this. My brain sees this, your brain sees that. That’s how social skills are and I’m trying to teach you to use your brain to see this in different ways.” We actually do a lot more of it with their peers.

By not giving a weight to either way that the “brain sees,” Lyra worked to position her students’ neurological differences (assigned by the system as emotional disability) as neutral. Although she did not spend time explicitly assigning the difference to disability, she nonetheless provided an opportunity for dialogue about human variation as a natural innocuous attribute.

Participants explicitly chose and embedded content and curriculum that decentered culturally normative perceptions in their classrooms to offer students opportunities to reflect on, question, and trouble their beliefs about diversity and difference. In general, educators’ narratives around specific curricular and instructive choices focused on providing students with opportunities to critically question and critique their own underlying belief systems. This was most often paired or elicited with the introduction of more generalized topics that taught toward tolerance and social justice
across classrooms. For example, educators described more generalized approaches to teaching about diversity by discussing their use of culturally relevant pedagogy and texts, as well specific diversity initiatives that included infusing curriculum on understanding emotional/behavior differences and women’s and black history months. Although all educators described the use of such frameworks to support understandings of difference and diversity, they often positioned this work in relation to more generalized social justice frameworks (i.e. programs such as teaching towards tolerance). For example, Norman discussed the utilization of a school-wide activity he initiated called the “wall of intolerance” in which all students within his school had to write down and place a specific intolerance that they noticed at their school on a wall that was temporarily placed within the school’s cafeteria. Norman described the wall as a symbol within his school that helped break down much of the stigma and marginalization of his students. He stated:

There was really a change in attitude about students with disability among the faculty, the general education teachers. They were willing to work with our special education team and you know not all of them of course, but a lot of them were welcomed to having students with disabilities into their classrooms and were willing to go the extra mile to support them academically.

Although I am sure this activity impacted the school community, there was not specific dialogue and/or integration of more specific teaching points on marginalization or stigma; it was a standalone event. Only two educators in this study specifically or directly engaged with diversity in the curriculum outside of these more generalized approaches. Further, the decision to infuse specific instruction and material to students on issues of
difference was only discussed in relation to race, not disability. Thus, it may be that participants understand the need to infuse culturally relevant content in terms of cultural and racial diversity, but not in terms of disability.

Troubling dominant notions of difference through specific instruction on civil rights, privilege, and marginalization was done solely through the lens of, and in relation to, race. Educators undertook this endeavor through the insertion of specific historical, social, and personal examples into their daily lesson planning. When asked about how she instructed students about difference, Ava described how issues of race came up through a lesson on Frederick Douglas:

[Ava]: I try to incorporate issues of difference that I notice they mention in the classroom. This year we’re doing two units on books about kids who are of a different ethnicity than them, and they’re going to kind of be uncomfortable with that because last year they were. Last year, when we did a historical unit analyzing the life of Frederick Douglas they were very defensive.

Carrie: So how did you break that down? What did you do?

[Ava]: I was just honest with them. Like for example, an opener that we did was to show a picture of Frederick Douglas when he was younger to when he was older. The older picture is edited, so it blends it with the background of the book cover and he looked white. Then I showed the other picture where it is more visible that he is black. They were asked to write down which picture they preferred, why, and what they thought of each picture. The students said that he looked more angry, and in the other, he looked more like somber, and kind of like
a wise old man. One kid said, “I like that one better.” I asked “Why?” and he responded, “because he’s white.”

Carrie: So what did you do in that situation?

[Ava]: I was just like “Oh what do you mean by that?” He’s like “Well I just like him better as a white.” Well I asked, “Why would it matter?” He said, “I don’t know, just would.” That was something I tried to trouble with them a bit. We couldn’t really talk about it for just one day, but we kept going back to this idea of why one picture was perceived as better or worse. It was kind of constant.

Ava used specific aspects of the curriculum, most often history and social studies, to mediate conversations with students that prompted discussion and critical questioning about civil rights and race. These instances were taken up to begin students’ problematization of their own beliefs around the socially constructed normalization of white middle class ideologies. These discussions promoted students’ ongoing and critical reflection on building cultural competency about historical instances of oppression toward current political, social, and ideological belief systems that saturate and privilege certain ways of being. Yvonne recalled a unit she had recently completed with her students that centered on destabilizing generalizations and exposing students to specific aspects of race. She discussed the importance of talking about race and utilized a civil rights curriculum she developed to start the conversation.

[Yvonne]: I included lots of stuff to describe the civil rights movement … So during the unit, they looked at the work of many of the revolutionaries, and examined photographs from the time. We also looked at who was involved, there was one picture of white people protesting integration and civil rights, but at the
same time, so they didn’t generalize and think that all white people were involved and were racist—we looked at photographs of individuals who were white and black protesting together…

When I was actually teaching the unit, I sort of went along with their questioning and thoughts … a lot of them have really insightful things to say. I pushed those ideas along. I used their responses and questions to sort of gauge where they were—what did they want to know, what did they have questions about, what wasn’t clear to them, what’s too much, what isn’t enough etc. They actually really surprised me. For example we took some time to analyze the character of Malcolm X. Even that was deeper than I would have thought.

We put a picture of Malcolm X on the door. My co-teacher made a joke about whether or not that was a good idea based on some of the things he said in history. I said back “Well I know we all love MLK, but I am sure you wouldn’t agree with all of the things he has said.” That picture sparked conversations. The students asked if he was a good or bad guy. We were able to talk about what he did and what that meant. One of the students brought up [Trayvon] Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. We talked about if all cops were bad or racist. We started this whole conversation around generalizability and that led to them beginning to understand that they can’t take what they hear for granted.

I want them to be critical thinkers and to ask questions. I also want them to understand context. I want to prepare them to understand this institutionalized racism. That America isn’t a place that is always fair, so they understand what privilege means and don’t react in a way that may hurt them. I also do think it’s
important for them to be aware of racism. I don’t want to preach a color-blind philosophy to them … so I try to help them to talk about that uncomfortableness in a safe space.

Providing meaningful opportunities for students to critically think about and question prejudice and racism helped Yvonne feel as though she was providing a space for her students to dismantle and bring to light many of the current struggles and institutionalized racism that African Americans continue to be subjected to in the United States. She felt as though these conversations were vital to her students. Yvonne mentioned that although these conversations may be “uncomfortable” (especially for her white co-teacher), they were necessary for her students, who were mostly Black. Without having an opportunity to engage within these critical conversations, her mostly Black and Latino students would not find a space to begin to unpack discrimination and gain cultural competency. Further, she positioned the unit as an occasion to provide opportunities for her students to learn about how power and privilege continue to work within an institutionalized racist state.

Infusing pedagogy related to the cultures and identities of their students and teaching toward difference were necessary aspects of Yvonne’s and Ava’s identities as educators. Yvonne, who worked in a school that was dominantly Black and Latino, felt it was her responsibility to teach about race, while Ava, who taught in a majority low SES, rural, and white school, felt that she needed to help her students better understand diversity and unearth some of her own students’ commonsense notions about culturally and racially diverse backgrounds. Both teachers took time to allow their students to challenge and complicate their understandings of discrimination and racism (Epstein & Gist, 2013). Culturally relevant pedagogy that centered on race provided a space where
their students could begin to critically question and reassign their own underlying belief systems (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is highly significant to note that the only educators who chose to infuse these elements directly into the curriculum were the only two individuals of color in the study. Participants described these teaching points in relation to their own personal backgrounds and experiences around issues of race. Culturally relevant pedagogy that both troubled normalcy and unearthed students’ conceptions and cultural competency was a prominent aspect of education to these two educators’ professional identities (Brown, 2004). This manifested in a variety of ways for both participants and pointed to the importance that their individual identities as people of color had on their overall curricular and instructive choices.

However, when I asked specifically about how issues of disability were infused or troubled directly through infusion into the curriculum, participants were unable to produce any concrete ways in which they did. Many even stated that they should but have not. At some level, participants still resisted an assimilationist discourse through their individual and class-level choices through differentiation, dialogue, and (for at least two of the participants) embedding of diversity into their content. Their attempts to reframe disability and difference as a positive, valuable, and normal aspect through explicit classroom choices provided, highlighted, and at times emphasized diversity as a salient aspect of being human—this was especially prevalent for teachers who identified themselves as people of color or understood disability from the frame of intersectionality. Nonetheless, although they developed classroom cultures based on embracing diversity and difference, participants were still limited by many of the institutional and societal constraints that they knew as a reality for their students. This was particularly prominent
in the restrictions that the accountability movement placed on educators to meet certain performance markers and standards.

DSE Identity in direct relation to current reform initiatives: “Get[ing] through this stupid hoop”

**Accountability improvisations.** Throughout data collection, participants discussed the ways in which the current standardization and accountability movement affected their classroom practices and pedagogies. Multiple and varied stipulations had been placed on these teachers’ opportunities to make pedagogical choices that they believed best aligned with their overall belief systems and their individual personal and professional identities. These teachers cited the integration of scripted curriculum and the specific demands associated with preparing and teaching toward standardized assessments as instances where they continued to feel their autonomy and identities were most threatened. Educators positioned the integration of these methods—ones that they perceived as less pedagogically beneficial to their students and class in relation to their own work, action, and response—to recent policy implementations (Ollin, 2005). As Nina discussed with me:

At one point I was teaching this lesson, the administrator came in and observed me. I was teaching a language-based lesson … it was a writing lesson and I was using visuals, a picture to support free writing … I had this picture and we were talking about it, we were assigning a name to it, and they were asked to draw the picture themselves, and I lastly, I put words that they described to go with their picture. Basically, they told me the story of what their picture [was] and I wrote it
down. And we [the administrator and I] met after the observation, to kind of
debrief about my lesson. She was very interested, asked a lot of questions.

But then I got frustrated, I had mentioned that this strategy had been really great
for these kids this year, and I wish I had it last year. But then she pushes back a
little. She wants me to use this program that was handed down to the district for
writing; it’s designed to help students develop a structured way to write
paragraphs. I did that program last year with the kids and they still couldn’t tell
me what a sentence or a paragraph was.

Then she asked me “how’s this going to help them pass the state testing.” And I
asked her “Why is that what you care about?”… Then she asked “How is this
going to help them graduate, how is this going to help them in the future?” I
responded “that’s a great mindset to have, however that mindset is why these kids
are so far behind because we’re trying to push them in a way that doesn’t support
their learning style, is not appropriately differentiated, and doesn’t meet them
where they are. My goal is to meet them where they are and then help them
increase their abilities in writing.” Yet her question is how is this going to help
them with the statewide testing. And I thought to myself, yeah but that’s our
problem. We push these kids so far and we don’t actually take the time to
recognize where they’re at and what they need. You know I have kids that just
won’t write for me but then when I use this strategy, they will write and that’s
amazing…

About five minutes later, Nina came back to this instance and to her reflections about her
own teaching choices:
I’ll play around with the method that the district wants us to do, whether it’s in reading or writing or math, I will first try it the way that our district wants us to teach it, like the paragraph structuring and writing process. But then when it’s unsuccessful, I figure out what works for the kids, implement that, and that usually works. Like the picture strategy I used with the kids. I tried what the district wanted, but then did what worked for the kids sitting in front of me.

Despite Nina’s professional vulnerability holding both a novice teacher position and actively subverting administrator and district demands both directly (“…why is that what you care about?”) and through her choice to utilize teaching methods that were not approved by the district or her administrator, she nonetheless took the risk to speak out against classroom pedagogical practices that were not proving beneficial to her students. Within both facets of the encounter, going against prescribed teaching methods and in her own dissonance with her administrator, she asserted agency toward her own professional beliefs. In part, in order to maintain and ensure some compliance with the demands, Nina met the minimum standard that was required by administration or the district, but then utilized pedagogical methods that she believed better met the individual needs of her students and class. Although participants felt pressure and demand to teach in a particular way utilizing a particular curriculum, they tried to find ways to retain fidelity to their overarching belief systems. Since “fidelity [to scripted or prescribed curriculum] left little or no room for teacher discretion and thus suppressed teachers’ reflection and discussion,” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 54) educators attempted and at times found ways to create a space within their classrooms that constructively subverted the policy demand toward their own will (Ollin, 2005). As Ollin (2005) suggests, Nina “play[ed] the
game” to ensure the appearance of professional fulfillment; meeting the minimum standard became a way to remain in compliance and be perceived as professional, while still staying true to her overall belief system.

Similarly, Ava described her “adapt rather than adopt” mentality around scripted curriculum in reading:

I did pull the text from the supplemental text portion of the CCSS module except for one of the books I found on my own and we’re using it [the book]. But how I’m viewing it is, I’ll take those learning targets and I’ll take the main ideas that they want us to touch upon … so they want us to focus on point of view, theme, whatever they be and we’ll do that but in our way. I’m not using that as a script. It doesn’t bother me, but I think maybe one day I might be at another school where they really push you to follow it and I might have to do that.

Similar to Nina, Ava met the minimum standard, but in her own way. Although at that moment, Ava didn’t feel the pressure to teach using the scripted curriculum, she understood that one day she might have to. Educator improvisations with prescribed content and curriculum, including meeting the minimum standard, point to the daily assertions and compromises that educators had to make in order to enact their identities (Walkington, 2005). Participants also used the integration of standards-based instruction to their benefit through their attempts to reframe basic assumptions about ability and competence, particularly for educators working within self-contained classrooms.

In order to counteract these ableist beliefs that stemmed from traditional understandings of what a classroom and student should look like, educators working within self-contained settings used the standardized curriculum to consistently rebut
beliefs about these students as non-academic. They positioned their students first and foremost as academic students whose right it was to be provided with rich and meaningful academic content just as any other student. This included the discussion and dissection of their use of grade-level curriculum in their classes, even when it was made public that others perceived these decisions as inappropriate. For example, Molly described her use of the curriculum to reposition the ability of her students:

I’m really trying to just keep my classroom running as much like a gen ed. classroom as possible with the adaptations that my kids need, but it always surprises the other teachers. I’ll tell you a funny story about rhyming. One of the kindergarten teachers goes “whoa you’re working on rhyming with your kids? You’re brave.” And I said, “well why I wouldn’t work on rhyming with my kids? They need to be exposed to that too. It’s part of literacy and its part of learning language.” You know they’re [the general education teachers] are surprised that I do the things that I do.

The school got a new reading curriculum last year. I asked one of the reading teachers to kind of walk me through the guided reading book and how to set it up, because I wasn’t invited to the training. And so she goes “Well you do embedded reading?” I go well “Yeah, they [her students] need to be exposed to print. It looks a lot different than probably what you are doing in your classroom but we do embedded reading.” I don’t think people realize that what I am doing in my room really isn’t that different [from] what they’re doing, but they use augmentative devices, switches and touch screen computers. I think they get a
little scared. They assume that it has to be drastically different because of all of tech stuff. But when you get down to it, it really isn’t that much different.

Molly’s utilization of the standardized general education curriculum accomplished two intertwined goals. Using the standard curriculum first provided rich and meaningful academic opportunities to her students and also troubled and counteracted particular beliefs about individuals with more complex disabilities. She positioned her students as capable and her classroom space as academic through the use of a standards based curriculum. She further stabilized a presumption of competence by seeking out the use of the new reading curriculum that was institutionalized for the rest of school and district. Every participant working in self-contained settings discussed the importance of teaching toward general education curriculum in some way. Participants (in these settings) described how they consistently paired their students’ access to general education content with best practices that recognized multiple and varied ways of learning—as Molly noted, it was “really [not] that different [from] what they’re doing…” Molly thought she could use this instance to support the inclusion of her students. Although her practice provided her students with meaningful access to the curriculum, in order to assert their competence and position them as academic learners, educators in the study whose students were placed in segregated settings nonetheless used methods and strategies that fell within the dominant paradigm of schooling to confirm their students’ abilities. Throughout their work to reaffirm the competence of their students, participants therefore reestablished and reframed competence and ability toward a commonsense framework of schooling that positions the standards and assessment as reliable and valid markers of intelligence (Rice, 2008; Slee, 2011).
Participants who took up these methods to reframe competency bought into competing discourses of normalcy. In order for students to be presumed and positioned as competent and therefore deemed normal, educators like Molly had to work within the constraints of standardization and normalization. Similarly, Lyra discussed how she struggled to provide access to inclusive settings because of presumptions regarding her students’ behavior that made access to general education only possible when her students were monitored and thus restricted to a certain way of being:

Like my fifth graders could access common core curriculum for science, social studies, language arts, and part of that. They really could. But they’re not because they just have no one … they just need someone to walk them to class, make sure that they stay there, and make sure that they are on task...

Lyra positioned access to general education as restricted to certain ways of being, although to her “they really could.” Nevertheless, staying on task and within class became a marker for continued access to curriculum and content; students could only be perceived as competent when working within a limited framework for academics and behavior. Although participants attempted to reassign boundaries to support their individual goals in affirming the ability and competence of their students as capable members of their community, they failed to move toward more transformative aspects of DSE. The necessity for standardization, along with the continued presumption that students who were perceived to have emotional/behavioral and more severe disabilities were incompetent, limited opportunities for real and sustained understandings of diversity and disability. Although the use of the curriculum did provide participants with significant opportunities to speak back to and maintain fidelity with the socio-cultural
framework and toward presumptions of competence that underscored their individual DSE identities (Kliewer et al., 2015). Standardization and accountability limited participants’ opportunities to teach toward their professional beliefs and maintain autonomy within their classrooms.

**Accountability constraints.** Educators in the study felt extremely constrained when the pressures of standardization left few, if any, choices or opportunities for individual autonomy within their pedagogies and practices. One aspect that marked splinters between their identities and the restraints that the standardization and accountability initiatives unduly subjected them to was the imposition of scripted curriculum that espoused particular manners of teaching and/or particular materials. Teachers were frustrated by the corporatization of materials that they felt affirmed a singular way of being and knowing or that were not culturally relevant to their students. As Lyra mentioned:

> Kids don’t learn unless you relate the material to them in some way … Well one of our reading programs is called reading mastery. And the whole crux … The crux of it is it’s scripted and you have to follow a script. You cannot deviate it. Well, the stories that they have to read it’s like talking about coconuts and coconut milk and it gives the students a diagram of a coconut and they have to identify where the meat is. This is ridiculous. Like my kids don’t give a fuck about a coconut, right?

A core belief of Lyra’s pedagogical practice was relating the material in a meaningful way to her students by attending to cultural relevance. When faced with handed-down and scripted curricula that was not relatable or relevant to her students, she became
frustrated (“this is ridiculous … my kids don’t give a fuck…”). Her own professional skills as a teacher were undermined when she felt forced to retain fidelity to materials and practices that she did not believe in. Her own perceived inability to deviate from the script and adapt the curriculum to her individual contexts and classroom learning needs threatened a belief that was central to her professional identity. Although participants often supplemented these texts with more culturally relevant materials, they had become fed up by the influence that had been exerted over them by the mandated use of particular materials and programs. As Eric mentioned:

> Just at the simplest level such as text choice, I used to have much more independence. But as soon as the Common Core came in, you were basically told you are going to use this book. You’re going to teach in this sequence, with this focus. And if the material wasn’t coming from a publisher, if it wasn’t officially labeled as part of the Common Core practice, it got much harder to use and justify the use of those materials. That idea of making the content more holistic, and about the students in the classroom definitely went out the window. I feel like it became skill and drill.

As Eric and Lyra both noticed, their own professional knowledge, along with the relevancy of materials to their students, seemed to be pushed farther and farther to the margins with the advent of current reform initiatives, in lieu of certain prescriptive and published materials. They felt the overall imposition of these materials on their practice. Methods of teaching and learning that relied heavily on highly scripted and non-contextualized strategies, methods, and materials worked to de-professionalize and de-skill the knowledge and profession of teaching, an aspect that was central to participants’
understanding of who they were as teachers (Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Schneidewind, 2012; Valli & Buese, 2007). The continued pressure (by district stakeholders and even themselves) to teach to the test also constrained the assertion of their identities.

Participants believed if they deviated from the prescribed method that they knew would be utilized on grade-level and accountability testing, their students would be disadvantaged by the mechanisms that followed and were part of testing, and be placed at a severe loss. Although a few teachers tied this to their own performance on teacher evaluation, in general, most were fearful of the consequences and repercussions that students would face for not performing well on grade-level assessments, including undue anxiety and stress and the more significant threat of not graduating from high school. As Yvonne described:

I think that these are the standards [the Common Core standards], this is what they are supposed to know, and then you teach it in a way that you want. But that sounds better in theory than it really is because you could teach it how you feel is best for your students but the wording, the way the problems are posed on the grade level assessments are very specific and particular to the Common Core state test. If you don’t teach the curriculum in a certain way then all of the kids are going to bomb the test. They’re not going to understand. I shouldn’t say all of them, but for a lot of the students if you don’t use the common core language and teach to that, they are not going to be successful.

Similarly, Angela noted:

Because of my current role, I have been in a lot of the general education classes and I’m not seeing any differentiation at all. I’m seeing the teacher sitting at the
front lecturing to the class as a whole. I don’t know if they’re just missing the point. I don’t know if it’s the curriculum that my district bought, but I’ve been kind of underwhelmed with the instruction. I’ve only been at this school for a year and a half, but I have not been impressed at the level of the teaching that I have seen. And certainly differentiation I mean it’s just not happening.

The teachers are particularly focused on math and the way they are instructing in math. I’m just seeing those spending two hours a day on math, picking apart and teaching explicitly to the language and the verbiage. They’re really hammering the kids on that and a very specific question pattern because that’s how it’s going to be on the test. And they’re referencing that over and over again in the classroom.

Both Yvonne and Angela’s narratives converge at the pressures to prepare students for the test through the abandonment of their own beliefs about teaching. Both participants positioned the practice of teaching toward the test as not beneficial to their students and outside of their own pedagogical commitments and beliefs. Because of the continued pressures associated with performance on these assessments, teachers (both those in the study and those that study participants reported working with) felt as though they had to focus their practices on teaching toward the test, a phenomenon that has hallmarked much of the reform and audit culture (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker & Bolt, 2008). Even Yvonne admitted that it was not the Common Core curriculum that posed the threat, but the grade-level assessments associated with the curriculum; if she did not teach the curriculum in the particular way that it would be presented and assessed on the test, then her students would not be perceived as competent. Similarly, Angela noted that because
of the focus on the assessment, general educators moved their practices away from those with pedagogical benefit, such as differentiation, toward strategies that depended on students’ repetitive and rote memorization of specific questioning patterns; in other words, skill and drill. Many of these constraints were specifically tied to the time educators felt that they had to prepare students for the test.

By putting the current reform movement ahead of students’ needs, educators struggled to maintain meaningful opportunities to enact their identities. For example, Ava recalled asking her co-teacher to go back and reteach particular concepts students were struggling to understand. She remembered:

They didn’t do well on this, and they’re not understanding. They were flat out telling me that they don’t understand. So I asked her (the co-teacher), “Is there a way that we can go back for just ten minutes tomorrow and reword how we explained it or explain it in a different way?” And instantly she responded “No, we can’t. We have to do the next lesson.”

The dominance of the general education teacher over the pace and rate of the class, regardless of student understanding and mastery, worked to reproduce a limited view of schooling; it specifically moved away from collaborative and interdependent classroom culture toward conceptualizations of assimilation and efficiency that depended on students keeping up (Lehman & Lava, 2013). The pressures surrounding performance for both students and teachers were heightened because of the lack of time educators had to move through the rigid curriculum.

The standards and accountability movement seemed to make practicing their commitments, and thus many aspects of DSE, less available to participants within their
schools. Amelia mentioned numerous times that the increased emphasis on standardization and testing stifled opportunities to teach toward her identity within her classroom:

Part of what sent me over the edge that year was that I had just started teaching a tenth grade class and I felt the pressure with them … I was passing these students on to these other teachers and they’re going to want them to have read particular texts to prepare for the regents … And I tried to kind of do it in my own way, but the reality was I had a real hard time integrating my beliefs and my pedagogy with what I believed were the required texts. And I think this under fire right now and I think our pedagogy, my pedagogy, I’ll speak for myself, is under attack. It’s hard not to take that in because it’s your core.

Amelia admitted that the increased focus on accountability led to a questioning of her own fidelity to the foundation of her professional identity. If she did not prepare the students in tenth grade using the “required texts,” her own or other educators’ performance might be called into question. The focus on standardization and accountability made it difficult for her to maintain allegiance to her belief systems, and as she noted, she had a hard time integrating her beliefs and pedagogy with the restrictions and demands to utilize the required materials. In essence, in order to ensure adequate preparation and readiness for the exam, Amelia felt as though she had to abandon many elements that were central to her teaching. The pressures associated with preparing for the test positioned many educators with less time and/or chance to teach toward their identities. Sometimes, like in the case of Amelia, these pressures caused teachers to question if there was a place for their DSE identities and practices that embodied those
identities within today’s schools. Their daily school life was consumed by time, including the impending assessment, the roll out of a curricular unit, and the continual pressures that have come to be a large aspect of schools’ and teachers’ lives.

Time pressures to remediate students’ ill performance and deficits on standardized assessments were also a pronounced aspect of their daily negotiations around enacting and maintaining their DSE identities. Participants spent a significant amount of their days conceding to the demands of accountability and performance that continue to hallmark the current educational environment (Apple, 2007). These pressures were heightened in both Eric and Amelia’s experiences teaching Academic Intervention Service (AIS) classes, a program outlined by the NYSED to provide academic services to struggling students (NYSED, 2000). Since the placement, scope, and purpose of AIS was directly tied to students’ perceived deficits, Amelia and Eric felt that by its very nature, their position and perceived effectiveness as teachers were bound and directly tied to deficit-based frameworks. Further, since the AIS class schedule in both of their schools was not regularized (they did not meet with their students consistently or periodically, but a few times a semester), both felt as though they had little time to support students in a meaningful way that maintained at least some allegiance to their espoused identities. When asked how her current classroom practice and pedagogy reflected her own social justice and DSE teaching identity, Amelia responded:

I feel like I used to do that more. I think I feel more pressured. I feel a little bit more pressured in terms of time because I only see them twenty times before the test. And I’m always feeling like I’m kind of behind the eight ball in terms of ability.
I used to build it [notions of social justice] into my lesson. I used to make space in the lesson to kind of have time for questioning. At the beginning of the year I was able to do that when I think I had a more of a sense of space and time, we’d read poems and the conversations of those poems could be activist. I could choose materials that brought about deep and critical questioning, kind of push that.

I think in general it was more of these like casual moments that I tried to infuse it … But now the kids feel it, kids come up to me all the time and will say I don’t know why I’m in this class. I shouldn’t be in AIS. It’s considered the dumb class. And then it becomes like the judgment of this class. I really think AIS needs to get troubled a bit you know.

There’s this kid I have now, who has failed the regents five times, he has taken AIS five times. What is that doing to this kid? So whether or not anybody is saying to this kid you are less worthy, there is absolutely an assumption that if you go to AIS, you are struggling. The other day, I had a student, she got put in AIS, and she was like I don’t know why I’m here. I do fine, I think my teacher thinks I’m stupid. I’m not stupid … And this sort of belief that they don’t have the skills, that they don’t have the capacity, that they don’t have the knowledge or the wherewithal to get through this stupid hoop. To me, that is honestly stupid.

Amelia admitted that she used to embed more critically conscious elements that led to more activist thinking and questioning within her practice. Now, the lack of time, as well as pressures associated with the class and assessment performance, have left her with little chance to engage in more prominent troubling with her students within her class, which she admitted was needed. As she mentioned, students placed in AIS were
perceived as “dumb”; the students felt and knew these assumptions (often questioning their own placement). The class purpose itself was constructed and dependent on deficit thinking. The focus on efficiency, performance, and standardization led participants to, at times, abandon aspects of their critically conscious teaching identities to meet the constraints of time and the assessment (Ball, 1999; Connell, 1995; Smyth, 2001). Even Amelia herself felt constrained by these same assumptions surrounding her own presumed (in)ability.

At a later point in the conversation, Amelia reiterated these feelings regarding the purpose of the class and who it served in relation to her own role. Amelia felt in some ways like she herself had been ability profiled (Collins, 2013) because of her disability:

But part of what happened was that they took away all my English classes. I felt like that was a kind of piece of the discrimination. I used to teach three different courses all of which got taken away from me and got replaced with AIS English. So that was the piece that shifted after I came back from medical leave. That is what changed.

Amelia had come to consider that her own placement in AIS was influenced by the administration’s beliefs about her (in)ability to teach at the needed pace of the regular classroom. Although we didn’t actively discuss this, it was evident that Amelia felt that if she did not have the physical constraints that had recently manifested in relation to her disability, she would still be teaching the three sections of English and not be relegated to teach AIS. She believed her own ability to teach “regular” classes was placed in doubt because of her disability (Knight & Wadsworth, 1996). The priorities of the school had become rationalized within the rigidity of the demands of reform. The restraints of the
reform movement became a consistent threat to educators’ opportunities to assert their individual DSE identities. In some instances, the restraints inherent to the reform movement resulted in a dialogue that moved away from a basic tenet underlying DSE practice.

Conversations with the participants sometimes moved away from inclusive frameworks and toward service within more restrictive settings based on their rejection of the models of teaching that were occurring in co-taught or consult classrooms. The move away from espousing service in inclusive settings as the most beneficial option for their students fell under a discourse of control or educators’ ability to use their time with students in the most efficient and beneficial manner. Participants expressed that their own abilities and opportunities to choose strategies and teach lessons in a manner that they believed supported the growth of their students and class had been extremely constrained. If they were operating in their own classrooms, even if those classrooms were segregated spaces, educators believed that they could engage in pedagogically preferable teaching strategies that both better aligned with their beliefs and accounted for individual strengths and needs. Although these revelations were mostly hinted at and quickly rebutted, they occurred with a number of the participants. A segue in the conversation toward self-contained classes often occurred after participants had discussed some of the constraints they were currently feeling within the culture of reform and accountability. When asked about how her teaching identity has manifested in the classroom around instruction, Yvonne mentioned:

…You have so many different types of kids and levels … and you try to support them in lots of ways that speak to those differences, but now you’re like, okay am
I doing you a disservice because you have to know this? It does take a lot and I do think it becomes very overwhelming especially in connection with you know state tests and CCSS and all of those things. In some ways I feel like self-contained … it’s hard because in some ways I feel like during self-contained is when I had the most opportunity to do the most individualized work with my students. I really felt like during those times I could do a lot more of what I wanted to do. I had a lot of freedom. I had an opportunity to be really creative and ask myself constantly, how can I get this to them? How can I do this, how can I do that? I also see the negative side of that being that you know a lot of self-contained classes tend to be like, if they’re not making a bunch of noise no one is really paying attention to them. And you know people could be teaching one thing or not teaching at all….

The transition from differentiated and culturally relevant pedagogy that supported students toward self-contained classrooms as a viable option converged at standards and accountability. Yvonne began by first describing the use of students’ differences to inform her pedagogical practices, then describing the constraints that she felt had been placed on her to teach in a certain way. The conversation shifted when she began to recall the freedom and choice she had while teaching in self-contained classes, including her own set of circumstances “to do the most individualized work” with and for her students. Although she quickly rebutted her perspective on the validity of self-contained settings (“a lot of self-contained classes…”), the remarkable ease in which non-inclusive self-contained teaching settings became perceived as viable options for their students pointed to the increased level of frustration with demands that these teachers were experiencing
in relation to the current pressures of the reform movement. It also spoke to the pliability of participants’ overall commitments within today’s schools when faced with competing demands on their DSE identities.

The idea that self-contained teaching settings are sometimes a better option also manifested through explicit naming of “cognitive dissonance” or an idea that an individual can co-exist with conflicted feelings when working within systems that do not espouse their ideologies. One participant, Lyra, cited Tim Villega’s popular blog “Think Inclusive” to describe her relationship to the current school culture, inclusion, teaching in self-contained settings, and disability studies. Lyra cited Villega’s use of the term “cognitive dissonance” in a recent blog post to describe the reasons why he still teaches within a self-contained setting to justify and rationalize her own experiences about working within and against the system. As the blog post stated, “As we wait for inclusion to permeate the education reform movement we need teachers who are willing have high expectations for their students and create ways that even in a segregated classroom can provide inclusive opportunities” (Villegas, 2014). What did it mean to adopt and take up this stance, “…to create ways even in a segregated classroom [to] provide inclusive opportunities…” when naming yourself as DSE? In some ways, my participants problematically conflated the demands and pressures that have underwritten the standards and accountability-based reform movement with placement and service within self-contained settings. Since they were unable to see ways in which they could intervene to benefit their students, they began to place value in spaces where they were able to better assert control and autonomy, even if it moved away from another aspect that was central to their identities. These circumstances beg to ask if one aspect of the DSE identity
outweighs another. Did teaching within self-contained settings with pedagogy that centered on the students mean more to participants’ identities than teaching within inclusive settings where they may have had fewer opportunities to use their sphere of influence? The constraints of the current reform movement are positioning individuals who would seem to fundamentally believe in inclusion away from a focus on inclusive settings.

Although participants felt the pedagogical methods adopted by the teachers with whom they were working were both ineffective and in some ways damaging to their students, this rationale may seem to reify certain prescriptive and professionalized notions of teaching students with disabilities with which DSE attempts to respond. At first glance, one might assume that participants’ beliefs that self-contained service is viable lie simply within a framework that provides specialized instruction within a smaller placement, but I believe that their experiences move beyond these traditionalist perspectives. Although in some ways participants buy into discourses that frame self-contained classes as spaces for more specialized instruction, they do so while placing blame on the current reform and audit culture. Schools are abandoning differentiated and culturally relevant pedagogy because of the pressures and demands of the accountability movement. Since the current school culture does not seem to value these teaching strategies and methods, could self-contained teaching become a better and easier choice for educators within the system in deference to teaching toward performance markers? As opposed to either having to defer to or compromise toward these demands in general education, educators felt as though they had some purview of control in these spaces that they could bend to their will more easily. At the same rate, they also spoke of their more
tactical attempts to embed and sneak in pedagogically beneficial models with colleagues in their classrooms, which will be more fully discussed within the next chapter. Asserting who you are and what you believe within the demands of accountability proved to polarize what one would assume educators who identified as DSE would most deeply believe about inclusion.

Concluding thoughts and limitations within the classroom

Participants positioned their classrooms as literal spaces to more fully enact and maintain their professional identities. Although their framework was limited by both the current and continued realities of public schooling, the assertion of pedagogy aligned with DSE in participants’ classrooms was a significant part of their professional identities. Through practices that they named and aligned as DSE, educators attempted to construct a classroom that embraced and normalized difference. Since they positioned the classroom as a space dedicated and centered on their students, educators used their pedagogies and practices to focus on translating and internalizing a framework of difference and diversity directly to their students. Many of the aspects that educators conferred and named as DSE might be considered solely as engaging within inclusive pedagogy, but educators positioned and named these aspects as central to enacting their DSE identities within their classrooms. Differentiation is a common inclusive practice, as well as laying the classroom foundation regarding fairness vs. equality. Nevertheless, the increased pressures and demands associated with the current schooling environment, including the continued focus on accountability and standardization, left many of the educators struggling to find ways to speak back to and reframe their work toward their DSE identities in their classrooms. In many ways, the demands of standardization left
educators feeling as though there was not a sustained space to enact their belief systems. Maintaining fidelity to all aspects of DSE were also made more difficult because of multiple, varied, and sometimes competing demands that had been made a reality within their work as public school teachers. Nonetheless, educators positioned the classroom as situated within a salient sphere of influence for my participants’ DSE identities.
The previous chapter discussed how these teachers came to understand and enact their commitments toward a disability studies perspective within their classroom practices and at the institutional level. By claiming a DSE identity, they placed value on and reframed disability outside of traditional notions embedded within special education. Educators in the study worked to create a classroom culture that was based on and celebrated difference. However, because these teachers worked within systems that espoused and were based on deficit and medically based understandings of disability, they had to actively navigate and negotiate what a DSE identity meant. In order to maintain a semblance of self and align themselves with this identity, these teachers found ways to talk back to and reframe disability (along with other differences) at their schools and with various stakeholders with whom they came into contact.

Chapter 5 highlights the resistance work that these teachers engaged in and named as DSE with colleagues and parents. It focuses on the complex interactions that these teachers navigated while asserting a DSE identity within their personal and professional lives. Although participants’ work was not excluded from (and often occurred within) general education, much of it was taken up in relation to the procedures of special education; because of this, Amelia and Eric (both general educators), are noticeably less present.

The chapter is broken up into three large themes that elucidate the methods and strategies of reframing and resistance that participants engaged in at the individual level.
with colleagues and parents. I introduce the three prominent themes as central elements to their resistance work and utilize a framework of tactics to lay out how these participants made sense of their identities within their current contexts. Although sections of the chapter are separated based on each of the tactical realms in which the resistance work took place, in many instances these experiences can be translated as connective and intersectional labors. For example, in most instances, the tactics of “picking your battles” and “working the cracks” work in tandem with one another. It should be noted that the chapter also uncovers the compromises and contradictions that educators made in relation to enacting their identities within schools. To begin, I will examine the first tactical framework that participants adopted, often named “picking your battles.”

**Picking your battles: ‘Once you’re locked out you can’t make any change’**

For my participants, exposure to and explicit reframing of principles aligned with a DSE framework were often accomplished through calculated measures that weighed the risk of each individual choice based on perceived receptiveness, understanding of their locus of control, and the need to preserve future opportunities. Participants used opportunities that presented themselves or that they crafted thoughtfully to either expose individuals to tenets of DSE and/or reframe disability and special education away from deficit and medically based frameworks. Specifically, participants did not, in most instances, speak out against deficit and medically based understandings of disability without some assurance that the choice to assert their identities would not result in either personal, classroom, or institutional backlash or that would disrupt current or future endeavors. Participants had to find creative ways to assert their identities within routine aspects of their professional lives through exposing and reframing. In most instances
these teachers did not blatantly assert their identities, but took part in a series of small, nuanced, and sometimes subversive maneuvers that I borrow from de Certeau and label as tactics. Participants’ tactics relied on the limited ways that they were able to seize power through momentary interactions and occupations of the system toward their own will within their daily lives (Blauvant, 2003). Educators had hoped these maneuvers would incrementally move the individual, or an aspect of the institution, toward pedagogy and practice more aligned with DSE, but they acknowledged that they had to pick and choose when and with whom to engage these efforts. The power that participants asserted was, therefore, located within “a set of fluid and evolving relationships which form as a result of different sets of alliances or circumstances” (Ollin, 2005, p. 155). That is to say that participants consistently had to maneuver relationships and understand foreseeable consequences of the choices they made in asserting their critically conscious identities. As Molly noted:

I tread pretty lightly. I pick and choose when I want to share a different perspective that may conflict with our special education system [how it traditionally has run] and typically, that’s [traditional special education] what everyone’s mindset is when they work within special education. I’m very particular about when I share a different view or when I give suggestions of how we can go in a different way or when I propose something that hasn’t been proposed before and is being done differently than it has been done traditionally. Yeah, I’m a planner. I just sit and plan and I think okay this has to roll out, then this has to roll out, okay that’s going to provide for a really perfect opportunity for me to move in here with this....
For participants, as Molly described, it was a long process of knowing at what point to interject varying notions of competence, ability, and disability that countered traditional notions of special education. Because of these reasons, the majority of the teachers engaged within what they often termed as “picking your battles.”

“Picking your battles” is a familiar phrase; it is one to which we as a society have prescribed a particular meaning. In general, picking your battles implies that one should be able to gauge when to fight for a cause and when to let go; which instances to choose or choose not to contest an idea, attitude, or situation that may arise (that goes against what one believes). When one utilizes this tactic, one must decide if the potential outcome of raising an issue at hand is worth the effort in a given space, at a given moment. One, too, must consider whether changes (literally and figuratively) can be accomplishable by taking up and defending a counter assertion within a particular context. Simply put, picking your battles involves weighing the positive and negative consequences and deciding whether a given situation is worth some form of assertion of identity. Although picking your battles, at its core, seems to be adversarial, in general, participants did not position their efforts as inherently combative. Instead, participants shifted the intention away from winning a battle toward creating an outcome that supported their identity maintenance and the continued success of their students and that at the same time did not fracture the relationship with the individual or institution. Many of the teachers were apprehensive to always speak out and instead utilized the tactic of “picking your battles” to support their overall goals and the success they imagined for their students. This was partly due to the experiences many of these teachers had in the past.
As Norman, a veteran teacher with eleven years’ experience teaching had come to learn, many individuals were not open to varying frameworks of disability; or as he suggests, they exhibited attitudes that implied that they would be resistant to change.

[Norman]: You know I have realized that there are some people whose attitudes you’re not going to change and sometimes by pushing you’re going to drive them deeper into their negativity. Those folks and I hate to say this but I just got to give up on them because I know that I am not going to be able to be effective in overcoming that negativity. What we’ve typically ended up doing is, and I’m thinking particularly of one PE teacher that we’ve had at the school who just does not accept and does not see the perspective. He’s got to be nasty to everybody but he’s especially mean and nasty to our kids with disabilities who can’t keep up with the typical kids. But what we’ve just always ... you know, never scheduled our students with disabilities to be in his class. So we’ve had to institute some administrative controls (including not placing students with particular teachers) on it when we just break through, when we just can’t make that connection.

On an individual level, Norman has to continuously grapple with gauging the overall receptiveness of those around him. In this instance, he determined the PE teacher’s attitude as inflexible and not likely to change. To Norman, it was therefore not worth attending to the PE teacher’s attitude, and he decided to (dis)engage with an ignoring or avoiding tactic. Instead of changing the individual, he used administrative power to benefit his students’ experience and success. The effort he chose to exert in either instance was his own. As participants learned, they had to select with whom and in which situations to assert a DSE identity based on the individual and institution’s overall
responsiveness. Many of these teachers had come to know and understand the constraints inherent to working within the systems of both special education and public schooling. However, this method of brokering a DSE identity within schools was not always a known entity to all participants. The tactic of “picking your battles” was therefore acquired over the course of time and through induction into public schools and special education.

Throughout the process, there were noticeable differences in circumstances in which participants decided to talk back to and reframe toward a DSE pedagogical framework by novice and more veteran teachers. As previously discussed, teacher identity theories posit that teachers have to resolve who they are within schools (Beijard et al., 2004; Halpin et al., 2000; Olsen, 2008). Part of that experience involves learning the contexts of the particular school and district, including mechanisms for asserting a critically conscious identity in a way that individuals would respond to (Parkinson, 2008; Peters & Reid, 2008). Veteran teachers’ decisions of when and with whom to reframe toward a language and practice more aligned with DSE embodied a clear understanding of the complexity inherent when working both in the system and with individuals. Novice teachers, however, seemed to have not yet gained specific grounding in the constraints of working in and through the system in a consistently beneficial and advantageous manner. For example, Ava, a teacher entering her second year, was coming to understand both how and with whom she should engage in agency work. In the following excerpt, we discussed an instance in which she had confronted a colleague.

[Ava]: At Lincoln [her old district] I was very direct; if somebody said something that was upsetting me and they were being inappropriate about a kid, I would
automatically jump up and say, “That’s not right.” I would even bring in personal stories, there was a teacher who was complaining about a kid with ADHD who wasn’t taking his medicine, that he’s faking it. I would say something like my fiancée has ADHD and I am really insulted by everything you’re saying right now because it is a serious thing. He’s an adult man right now and he forgets to take his medicine sometimes, so when you’re making a kid responsible I don’t think he’s faking his disability label. Usually people would shut down. I guess I’m learning to feel people out first, which I tried to do at Lincoln [former school], but there I got so riled up by people because I just wasn’t used to that ignorant mentality.

Carrie: I remember you said that.

[Ava]: But then I guess that kind of helped me at Washington [current school] now. I’m just going to take some time, feel everyone out, see what they’re like, and then wait until it’s absolutely necessary to say something. There’s one teacher on our team that nobody is supportive of her mindset, but she’s like three years from retirement. It’s the same old story. She came up to me and said (we were talking about the kids and the struggles that they have), “Some kids are already in prostitution.” I just said “Yeah I know, that’s really unfortunate but when you see something and you’re raised that way you just think it’s my turn now too and it’s hard to break a cycle no matter what the cycle is.” She said “You can’t feel sorry for these kids though.” And in my heart and in my head I’m thinking that’s bullshit.
But she didn’t have that same mentality so I didn’t talk about it with her. I was just like okay, ended the conversation, and didn’t have a confrontation or anything. Really choosing when to talk back. Waiting when it’s absolutely necessary say oh I want to change this kid’s program. Waiting for an opportunity that will really going to affect the kid and not just when you’re saying something out of ignorance…

Ava made clear conclusions about the methods she used; that is, when she chose to speak up at Lincoln, “people would shut down.” Her overall decision was to essentially pick when and with whom to engage in a reframing dialogue. Ava, like Norman, learned through experience that the effort she put forth would not make a difference to the teacher who was close to retirement, even though she did not agree with her. In her mind, her efforts were better served when and where they would have a greater effect on the student. Participants often positioned the opportunities of their students as the determining factor of whether, how, when, and with whom to pick their battles. The language and understanding of “picking your battles” became a learned concept that distinguished the discourse that rookie and veteran teachers took up in relation to practicing their identities.

Selecting when to engage in their underlying DSE commitments didn’t necessarily mean that the participants were completely, or at all, satisfied with the outcome, but served to justify the compromise (at this point) as a means to their long-term personal and professional ends. They knew that they had some power when working relationally, but they were also aware of and keenly attuned to the influence that relationships could have on developing and creating opportunities. For these participants,
their agency is a constant assessment of the situation and who it will benefit both at that moment and in the future. As Yvonne discussed:

I was going over a math test and I pulled the five kids who did the worst on the math test. I pulled them and three of them understood the concept, their mistakes were just careless and I had two that I realized just didn’t get it. I kept the two and I was going over it with them. But then one of my students, not one of the original five, came to the room I was working in and sat down. And I asked him, ‘Well what are you doing here?’ And he said that my co-teacher sent him over. And I asked ‘Why?’ He’s said ‘I don’t know.’ At that moment, instead of me actually trying to provide intensive instruction to the two kids who didn’t get the concept, she sent him over for me to work with because he was not listening to her. He is an IEP kid. He tends to be very impulsive. He’s really smart but he has trouble raising his hand and waiting for someone to call on him, those type of things. At that point I didn’t send him back. I didn’t push back against her on that one, I didn’t want him to feel like I didn’t want him and I didn’t want to interrupt what the other two students and I were doing. There are times where I don’t push back against things because at that moment I feel like it may be in the best interest of the child. But if it’s academic and things that I think are important than I do say something.

We’re actually having a meeting next week about shaking the focus groups up for the students. I know he’s going to probably one of the kids that will be mentioned and I’m already aware that I’m going to have to push back against that one, academically he doesn’t belong in my group. It’s unfortunate for someone else,
I’m sorry if they don’t like that he doesn’t raise his hand every time that he has something to say. I get it, I know it, I live it, but that doesn’t mean that we’re going to put him back into the lowest group when he doesn’t belong here. We’re not doing it.

Similar to Ava, Yvonne chose not to confront the teacher immediately after her action, but instead understood that in that instance, it would better support the continued success of the child by not speaking up and not sending him back.

Participants’ thorough understanding and utilization of timing was a central tactic. In essence, that meant that the participants’ moves and countermoves were often left lingering, as they waited for an opportune time to enact them. Because their tactics were dependent on knowing and using time, educators were often "on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (de Certeau, 184, xix). In one such example, Erika used the absence of her school’s speech language pathologist (SLP) to bring up the need for students to be provided with and given access to communication devices (something the school’s SLP did not think students were cognitively capable of). At the particular moment Erika chose to engage in and contest the subject of access to communication devices, the school was contracting with a private SLP, which Erika gauged might mean she would be “up for anything.”

[Erika]: And so we’ve vendored with a private speech path[ologist]. Not being a part of the district, she’s up for anything. So, I was like, “All my kids need communication devices.” She’s like “Well we’ve never done communication devices for a preschool structured autism program because they don’t have the cognition.” I’m like “What? How would you even know that? You don’t know
any of my kids.” So I said, “Well could you just come in and observe the kids, see if it makes sense for them?” And she came in a few times and to her it was obvious that they needed access to the devices. And now she’s lobbying … I’m so thankful …. Now she’s lobbying for all my kids to get one and for us to be a pilot program…

Well I think it’s so silly that for the first time the AAC department thinks that we finally need communication devices. I mean that just boggles my mind that I could not get my own speech pathologist to even consider it. I had tried bringing it up a lot. It’s so crazy that I couldn’t get someone in for my itty-bitty’s that can’t talk, that have wonderful cognition, that need it so badly. But, instead, [I] had to use someone else who didn’t even work for the district to make this happen. You know you would think you’d want to start early with the little guys…

Erika seized upon the opportunity with the new SLP to cleverly assert the needs of her students. Although at first, the private SLP took up the same logic as the district’s SLP, Erika’s querying and insistence at that moment led the SLP to consider her cause and eventually take up Erika’s issue. Although her district’s permanent SLP was not happy after returning to find her students using AAC because it made, as Erika stated, “more work for her,” it nonetheless created the opportunity for her students to be considered to receive access to communication devices. She undoubtedly chose the right time and person to direct her concern. Selecting instances to speak up in terms of reframing and exposing their DSE commitments was done through participants’ knowledge of working creatively and flexibly within the system.
The concept of “picking your battles” also suggests that participants made calculated choices that were dependent upon their knowledge of the system and opportunities that were presented to exercise their agency and power. Resistance and activism by these teachers could therefore be described as a nuanced process where, through both opportunistic and purposeful action, they each had to find ways to critique or change the system, while remaining within it. They had the power to choose when and with whom to devote reframing efforts. Borrowing a phrase from feminist scholars Lock & Kaufert (1998), these teacher activists employed “strategic pragmatism” in order to exert their agency. The simultaneous interplay that participants exerted between the mechanisms of special education and public schooling, the institution and the individual, reflects the continuous negotiation and strategic planning teachers engaged in order to achieve their goals.

**Leveraging relationships with colleagues.** By and large, participants discussed the identity work that they traversed with their colleagues as the most complex and multifaceted interactions in their work lives. This was due largely to their conclusion about the necessity to remain, in some ways, cautious and not overly assertive when approaching teachers, administrators, and other district personnel about beliefs that placed them outside of the dominant ideology. Participants held two key perceptions in relation to their work with colleagues: First, that participants must maintain relationships in order to leverage them; and, second, that colleagues could influence their ability to move their ideas forward. In essence, they operated within a discourse of power, where their colleagues were perceived to have their own power to exert and that power had the potential to either undermine or support future opportunities. An example of this dynamic
involved Anna, who contemplated her own concerns about confidentiality during our first interview. She began our second interview unpacking her own reservations and reflections on the process:

I kept thinking about the fact that I kept asking you if this was confidential, which I knew it was. I already knew it was. We already discussed it several times, but I remember I asked you again at the end of our conversation and I kept reflecting on that and thinking why. Why is that so important to me? You know what I mean? So, I kind of thought and thought on it because I’m not afraid to … you know I feel like at this point I’ve got a bigger picture so I’m not afraid to like lose my position at work, or [have] someone tell me you know you’re not the right fit for our district, and you should go elsewhere.

I’m not so much afraid of that. I guess what I’m afraid of is I was trying really to come to the point where I was thinking what am I worried, what am I so worried about, and why did I keep asking that question. I think it’s because I feel like once you’re locked out you can’t make any change.

Like if you get locked out of a teaching position somewhere like a professorship, or you get locked out of something in particular, you know, they’re never going to get a different perspective. There’s never going to be anybody … you feel like there’s going to be no one else to represent this viewpoint. So, for me it was kind of being about locked out and not having access to somehow possibly making some type of change.

Anna’s fear that future opportunities for district- and system-level change could be thwarted was tangible. She did not want to be labeled as unprofessional by her district
because she believed it would “lock out” future opportunities for her to make more systematic changes within the system and district. Furthermore, like so many of these teachers, because Anna’s identity and resistant work relied heavily on leveraging personal relationships, she wanted to ensure these relationships were preserved (in at least the collegial sense) to some extent. In order to maintain allegiance to their commitments and beliefs within the current system of schooling, these teachers continually negotiated when and with whom to actively engage within a repositioning of discursive practice.

Predominantly, the place that these teachers shared as sites of occupation were those that focused on developing ongoing and trusting relationships with individual stakeholders that shifted individuals toward critically conscious understandings of disability and special education. At one point, Anna discussed a trusted colleague’s initial reaction to the concepts of DSE in relation to an online module she created for her PhD program for educators. She asked her colleague to “test” the module and did not have a positive reaction. As Anna stated, “she was so offended. She called me on the phone and just let me have it, you know, and basically wrote a scathing survey.” When she mentioned the module again within our second interview, I decided to further question Anna’s perspective of her colleague’s reaction.

[Anna]: So for me like even when I published that module that was hard because I was like how many people are going to read this and be completely turned off and then not want to even go down this road at all. And the module that was special ed versus DSE we [another PhD student and her] had people logging on and going through the module, and then taking our survey.
Carrie: Didn’t you say you had a colleague that did take it and she was completely turned off?

[Anna]: That was the one. She was so turned off and luckily she’s my really, really good friend so I kept talking to her about it and we’ve been continuously talking about it over the past year. Whenever we go out or something and it comes up, I’ll say, “Well this is why this and this is why that,” but at first she was still very turned off. She said to me, ‘Even the title of it special ed versus disability studies in education, you’re just setting it up to be pitted against each other.’ I had never thought about it that way. Someone is reading that title and that could really turn them off. While they are different, I feel like one of our points is that we want to somehow make them complementary of each other, especially because we don’t want to scare people off. We need these two things [disability studies and special education] to work together and not work against each other.

Carrie: Yeah, it’s the system we have.

[Anna]: Yeah, so it did really turn her off but because we’ve had this great relationship and we’ve worked together for so many years, she’s not so turned off that she said like forget it, ‘I am never going to look at that again.’ But in fact, it’s so funny. She and I just worked on a conference proposal. She’s kind of come around and she’s willing to entertain this other perspective. We worked on a conference proposal together and it has a disability studies point of view. She told me that ‘I want to know more.’ I’ve been talking about it with her the whole time I’ve been in this program, but then I feel like I really do appreciate her opinion because she gave me these other perspectives of the module when she logged on.
She makes me think, maybe I need to revamp that module, look at the language, because we don’t want to turn people off. Anna’s choice to not critically push the issue with her colleague at that instant and instead provide both time and a shared space for reciprocal and mutual knowledge sharing permitted her and her colleague to occupy a space where both benefitted. Her colleague remained open to the discourses offered by DSE and eventually found value within it. She also helped Anna reflect on her own framing of DSE in order to make the modules less offensive to individuals coming from more traditional backgrounds. If at that moment Anna had decided to continue to push the issue and confront her colleague about DSE, she may not have eventually come around to be more receptive.

Despite their knowledge of DSE and its relation to the current paradigm of special education, as well as to standards- and accountability-based reforms, participants often chose to enact small and decisive steps to ensure that the “radical” ideology of DSE was not seen as positioning the individual or the field as misguided or wrong. Primarily, participants intended to foster an environment where the individuals they exposed to these ideologies did not feel overly threatened. As Erika explained, she didn’t want to shut people off from these ideas, thereby closing the door for future opportunities to engage. One strategy involved participants’ decision to not use the language of disability studies when reframing or exposing colleagues to critically conscious understandings of disability and special education. As Erika described, her purposeful choice was to utilize the principles of DSE when reframing with colleagues, without naming it that way.

[Erika]: I kind of explain it to them in a way that is more understood. I’ll just kind of pull from DS and then just use whatever is applicable at that moment. But I’ll
never say well this is part of the disability studies framework. You know, I’ll never say it; I’ll just use it. Or, if a teacher says like I don’t think they should be included or, I’ll say, “Okay, tell me why” and it’s most often tied to deficit perspectives about disability—like the kid can’t do this or that. I then just kind of walk them along the entire journey. As things come up, I question them. Well, why do you think that? Or, maybe ask them if they had had a bad experience with inclusion? Or, maybe they are using the disability hierarchy. But, I never really say its DS. So, like even though I am using the framework or principle of DS as a way to approach it, I might word it differently or I just may leave the words DS out.

Part of Erika’s strategy included deciding when and which principles of DSE to “pull from.” She believed her decision not to use language that was privileged in DSE would remove a barrier to her colleagues engaging with it. In fact, participants often framed DSE in relation to pedagogy and practice that would be less foreign and more familiar to individuals (i.e. inclusion, civil rights, law, history). Participants posited that colleagues would be more acquainted with these principles and by choosing not to use the language of DSE, they would open up a space where active and guided reflection could take place.

In addition to utilizing a more common and understood discourse, teachers also drew upon institutionalized frameworks of hierarchical positioning to assert power and influence over individuals who held less power and influence within their schools. Many of these teachers, as stated before, felt like they had to be careful about which individual stakeholders they exposed more revolutionary ideas of DSE to within their schools. This was partly due to their desire to preserve and maintain relationships that they felt they
both needed to support their long-term professional goals and reflected their fears about being labeled as “unprofessional.” At the individual level, participants described the process of selecting stakeholders based on who they felt were open and receptive to new and alternative frameworks for viewing disability. By and large, participants were more apt to take risks with individuals whom they had some degree of power over or within the purview of their own classroom. Educators in the study were, for instance, more apt to reframe with student teachers and paraprofessionals. As Angela explained:

Most of the teachers I would say that have the real marginalizing kind of views are older teachers. I would say I pick my battles on that one because some people you’re just not going to change, which is unfortunate.

So, I went real heavy with my student teachers. I just finished my second student teacher for this school year and I really, really worked on them because they’re getting a special education credential and they are new to the system. I really worked with them on having a disability studies perspective and not using the medical model. The two students had never heard of disability studies, you know. They’re in a special education credential program and the university that I work with right now they don’t have a disability studies kind of emphasis. I feel like I did get both of them to understand the medical model and that the kids aren’t broken. I showed them how to work with our students using that mindset. They’re both young and get them kind of fired up for their practice, which was kind of nice.

Angela saw student teachers as individuals whom she could assumedly influence. These pre-service teachers were new to the profession and participants believed that exposure to
DSE would hopefully lead them to adopt alternative constructions of disability and reframe their students in less stigmatizing ways. Student teaching is a critical period of learning, refining, and practicing who you are as a teacher; it is one of the most significant periods of identity development (Halpin et al., 2000). At the same time, student teachers are vulnerable because they hold little power (Poirier, 1992). Host teachers, such as Angela, have power to exert over them. Angela positioned the work that she did with student teachers as concrete opportunities to mold identities toward a DSE orientation. Participants also suggested the potential longevity of these efforts; because these individuals were just entering the field, they would have the opportunity to expose these ideas to other people they came into contact with at their schools. Participants understood and used their own power and professional influence with paraprofessionals working with their classrooms in a similar manner.

The educators in the study had an established authority and were often seen as responsible for both student teachers and paraprofessionals. Teachers could use that power to their advantage and the participants often did (Giroux, 1986). At the same time, there was no assurance (as there never is) that individuals would internalize these alternative constructions. There was always the risk that student teachers and paraprofessionals could perform in alignment with, and thus imply their adoption of these ideas, without actually doing so or internalizing them. Identity work with student teachers and paraprofessionals was an easy choice that had very few repercussions; therefore it is not surprising that participants would begin their advocacy efforts with those individuals.

Simultaneously, when participants found an iota of support, they felt more comfortable taking on more critical aspects of DSE. These instances of more open
discussion about DSE were often based on opportunities that presented themselves naturally, along with participants’ overall understanding of the receptiveness of individuals to new ideas or an appearance of openness to varying ideologies. Anna and I discussed an instance in which she saw an opportunity and seized it, in order to discuss DSE with a paraprofessional.

[Anna]: Last week we were having this discussion. I think it came up because of a statement that was made about parents having a disability, and I overheard the paraprofessional talking about psychiatric disabilities and why did they breed. It was a flippant statement, something like, ‘If these people continue to have kids then I don’t even know why we should continue to service them because they’re sucking the money out of our system.’

Carrie: So what did you say?

[Anna]: I said “Okay, let’s talk about this. Why do we think that we can make that statement?” Then they responded, “Well it is, it’s so expensive, look at all the services this child has, and like my tax dollars pay for all that service.” I said back “Lets talk about if it was a Vietnam vet who goes to war and he loses like two limbs. Let’s say he loses his leg and he loses his arm. What do you think of someone that would need help that is disabled in that way?” And they said, “They serviced our country and we should support them.” And I said, “We have this child in our system and we think their parents have a mental disability (we don’t even know, if parent has a mental disability).” I said “Number one we don’t know that.” Then I asked ‘Why do you think that?’ And they responded “Because the special ed teacher was in the teachers’ lounge and she was saying that.”
And I said, “Number one, we don’t even know if it’s true; number two, we’re perpetuating something that could potentially really hurt the family and there’s no arguing with that.” They’ll say, “Yes, right, you’re right,” and I’ll say so “Even if, let’s say they do, both have some type of psychiatric disorder and then they have a child. You don’t think that they should have a right to have a child and they were like well no, they shouldn’t be able to have children? Well who’s right is that?” And then usually I bring up the history of disability. In this instance, I brought up Carrie Buck⁴.

I’ll kind of walk through the Carrie Buck story and then I’ll say “Was that right?” And they always say back “Well no, that’s not right.” I asked them “How is this different? You’re telling people that they don’t have a right to have children, you’re not making them physically enabled to have children, but you’re passing your judgment on them and telling them that they shouldn’t. You know how do you feel when people pass judgment on you? We don’t know the whole story. Is it my right to be able to tell somebody whether or not they can have a child? Even if they had a child and the child had mental disabilities or whatever it may be, who are we to judge and say that this Vietnam vet over here deserves services but this child doesn’t.”

I have not run into an encounter yet where they argue with that. You know they’ll say “I get what you’re saying.” I feel like its just bringing, it’s just approaching it

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⁴ Carrie Buck was the plaintiff in the United States Supreme Court case Buck v. Bell, after having been ordered to undergo compulsory sterilization for being labeled as “feeble-minded” (terminology that identified individuals perceived to have a low IQ and cognitive functioning). The surgery, carried out while Buck was an inmate of the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded, took place under the authority of the State of Virginia’s eugenics program. The case continues to serve as a reminder of the troubled logic and immorality of the eugenics movement within the United States and worldwide.
from a different perspective. It’s a lot of that quick judgment. But then when we break it down and look at the things that we do to others by passing judgment, and what is our decision based on. I kind of turn it around and try to have them reflect. I feel like that’s been most successful.

Through explicit reframing, Anna was able to support the personal reflection on belief systems that have been attached to disability. Foremost, her explanation and reference to the “Vietnam Vet” helped unearth the value and worth we have attached to particular disabilities, and therefore exposed the hierarchy of disability in a relatable and reflective manner to these paraprofessionals (Routel, 2013). She then utilized the historic example of Carrie Buck to illustrate the clear and eerily seamless connection to eugenics that continues to permeate disability (Charlton, 1998). Principally, the interaction between Anna and the paraprofessional offered an opportunity to engage in reflective questioning that unearthed culturally accepted perceptions about disability that are stigmatizing.

Attempts at reassessment and reflection with colleagues provided participants with clear and meaningful opportunities to practice their DSE identities. The tactic of picking and choosing when to reframe was also done with parents at a variety of levels.

**Reframing deficit perceptions with parents.** At the individual level, participants attempted to develop reciprocally beneficial relationships that helped foster opportunities with parents to disrupt deficit and medicalized prescriptions of disability. Although these reframing efforts were still complicated by a web of socially ingrained and constructed beliefs about disability, it appeared to be easier, in some cases, to convince parents of alternative notions of disability (especially about their own children). DSE identity work with parents felt much simpler to traverse than their work with colleagues. In part this
seemed easier, since participants positioned parents as having a shared—if not superior—expertise pertaining to their children (Causton-Theoharis & Kasa, 2010). It could also be attributed to the belief that although not entirely true, parents are often believed to operate outside of the system of the school (Payne, 2008). Although participants still treaded lightly, parents offered them [participants] an opportunity to both legitimate parents’ own beliefs about their children, as well as a space to share in the hopes and fears that they [parents] had envisioned for their children. In essence, these relationships offered educators an opportunity to help parents rewrite narratives that others had placed on their children.

Foremost, educators relied heavily on developing meaningful relationships with parents that broke down the traditional parent-teacher hierarchy that has been a hallmark of special education (Causton-Theoharis & Kasa, 2010). Educators described the considerable efforts they made to create relationships with parents that were based on mutual investment. As Molly described, “my biggest thing is getting on the same page, asking parents what is successful at home and letting them know that I want to be doing it the same way or vice-versa. Or sharing what has been successful at school.” Participants wanted parents to be comfortable coming to them about their children. This included initiating communication and being available to parents and families. They positioned their own communication and availability (with parents) as a vital aspect of their continuing practice, even if staff saw the parent as being overly needy.

[Molly]: You know the quote-unquote annoying parent that they [the administration] can’t stand, is the parent who I talk to almost every single day about her son because it’s important to her and she’s worried about him. There is
a lot of follow through at home when I talk to her. But you know the secretary
jokes every time that she calls she’s like oh you know Christine’s called me again.
I’m like yup, that’s because we have things to talk about because her son is
important to her, and she doesn’t see him for eight hours a day and I do…
In general, as Molly stated, participants refrained from taking up deficit perspectives
about parents and positioned them as having a valuable and intimate knowledge about
their children that could support their overall success within schools. Part of the work
included developing a consistent means of communication and knowledge-sharing
through email, text, and communication logs, as well as making themselves readily and
easily available to parents. Developing a relationship that was based on mutual
reciprocity and shared expertise provided a foundation for engagement and reframing of
students with and across family-school contexts. Even though all participants described
having a firm grounding and expressed a philosophy about parents as equitable partners
(and sometimes the most important members of the team), hurdles in parent-teacher
relationships were often complicated by deficit discourses educators placed on parents.

Although all of the educators in the study expressed a desire to develop
meaningful and reciprocally beneficial relationships, some were unable to strategize ways
to afford parents opportunities to share information. Unsuccessful examples that were
shared with me about collaboration with parents most often occurred because of the
parents’ deference to teachers as authority figures and “experts” on teaching and
schooling (Danforth, 2000; Ferguson & Ferguson, 2008). This resulted, at times, in some
of my participants positioning parents who did not share (or take part in dialogue in a
way that teachers perceived as valuable) through a deficit perspective (Artiles, Kozleski,
Although Nina, for instance, had mentioned to me that parents were the most important part of the team and their input was valuable to the work she did with her students, when I prompted for a specific example of how she gained parents’ input, she was unable to provide me with one. As I began to notice, Nina seemed to place blame on parents without being reflective on her own practices with these parents.

[Nina]: But other parents are distant. And some I haven’t met because they don’t come to the meetings. It’s sad, it’s like this is your kid and you don’t come to things. I mean our demographic here, I understand and I can see that, like, why parents don’t come or they can’t come. I get that, but it’s just sad because then it puts it all on us to make the decisions.

During the IEP meeting I don’t get many ideas from them. Not many have any ideas at all. I’m thinking about a parent that came in about a week ago, and we had this kid, he’s having huge behavior problems at the end of the day and mostly with subs [substitute teachers]. It was more like we were telling the mom about the behavior and she started crying and I said “Maybe there’s something happening at home that we just don’t know about. You don’t have to share that with us, but just knowing that maybe something else was going on is helpful because I think it changes our tone when we talk to the kid or we can understand.” She told us about how his little brother got taken away by his dad and all this drama and stuff. Knowing that kind of information is helpful and parents are usually more willing to tell you stories or experiences. They don’t always have
the best ideas but not any of the parents that we have, like I haven’t had any parents who suggested specific strategies.

Carrie: It’s interesting though so you’re putting value on the way in which they can tell stories about it. Maybe there’s a way to think about asking them for a story where this happened and how they responded to it instead of asking for particular strategies. I don’t know, I think sometimes that language is difficult because of the professionalized language. It’s not really accessible. Like teaching strategies, what is it? What does that mean to a parent? You know what I mean?

[Nina]: Yeah.

Carrie: I think sometimes as educators we’re talking to parents in a language that is not parallel and that makes it difficult for them.

At first, Nina recognized and stated, “I understand and I can see that like why parents don’t come or they can’t come.” But she then engaged within a deficit discourse to describe the input that parents had, stating, “they don’t have the best ideas” without a clear recognition of the privileged language she used to ask for suggestions from. She took up a framework that she was trying to counteract with her students. Part of the work of DSE and intersectionality is challenging deficit constructions of children, their families, and their communities (Oyler, 2011). At this point, although I was wary of doing so, I attempted to reframe the all too familiar discourse about uninvolved parents upon which Nina was drawing. I began by attempting to insert value to the notion of engaging in storytelling, as opposed to strategy sharing, which was something she had stated parents had engaged in. I had hoped that my interjection offered an opportunity for us to push the conversation forward about dominant assumptions, privileged language,
and collaboration with parents. Although Nina seemed to be responsive and our discussion moved toward issues of language and privilege, she nonetheless began from a place of deficit instead of reflection. Developing a shared and mutual relationship with parents that was based on reciprocity was not easy; it was often complicated by participants’ own beliefs about parents, along with parents’ own experiences and beliefs about teachers and school.

One aspect of reframing work with parents was the educators’ recognition that school personnel did not always place value on the multiple intelligences that students did have and instead focused on areas which parents came to understand as needing fixing; a central aspect of special education. Part of these teachers’ work was therefore to rewrite disability not as an obstacle to overcome, but as a natural part of human diversity (Rice, 2008; Ware, 2005). Active and ongoing reframing ran counter to the many prescriptive and medicalized narratives that saturated parents’ experiences (Gabel, 2005). Many of the instances of reframing occurred at the parents’ first encounters with disability, either within early elementary school years or within instances in which the child was just identified with a disability. As Yvonne described:

I know it’s hard to come into this room, where people are saying your kid can’t [do something] and I want them to be able to understand that there are some ways in which your kid can. At first, a lot of parents I work with just think their kids are lazy. They say, “Well, if he just works a little bit harder, takes a little bit more initiative then he would be able to do it.” I think it’s partly because it’s easier; if it was just about motivation, [but] if it’s something else it’s harder to fix. It’s hard for parents to get away from that fixing mentality. But I try to help them to
understand it’s not just about that. We talk about what types of accommodations or supports he might need to help him be successful. I often use myself as an example.

I think about the last meeting I was in, I was doodling and passing notes with my friend. If someone asked something I would be able to respond, but just from looking at me someone might think that I am not paying attention. At the same time, in that meeting I needed a break. So I took one. I think we forget that kids need that freedom too. We are constantly asking them to sit and listen, not all students learn that way. I know that I myself don’t learn best the way that we traditionally teach; I need visual notes or other adaptations and I recognize that. But school sometimes doesn’t. I want parents to know that if their kid loves art, that maybe one day they will be a comic book artist and we can figure out what they need to be successful in school. I try to use those relationships I have with them to begin a different conversation about disability.

Yvonne first began by recognizing the ever-present dynamic of special education that continues to be overloaded by professionals that privilege and create an unequal power differential (Danforth, 2000; Ferguson & Ferguson, 2008). Overwhelmingly, professional discourse dominates discussion in CSE meetings and it almost always centers on the discrepancies and problems the child is experiencing within school (Gabel, 2005). Deficit-based language and practice have been shown to limit the space that stakeholders like parents—that is, individuals perceived as non-professional by “experts”—can take

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5 A committee on special education (CSE) is a multidisciplinary team, appointed by the Board of Education. A CSE meeting occurs at least annually to review a child’s IEP, CSE meetings may also be requested if the CSE team would like to suggest any significant changes to a students special education services or program. Parents may also request a meeting.
up to exercise their voice and can be very overwhelming (Charlton, 1998; Danforth, 2000). Yvonne then moves on to discuss the parents’ positioning of the child as lazy; the all too familiar dialogue about motivation as the issue, and in this case the framing of disability as an area to overcome and, therefore, fix (McLean, 2008). Yvonne did not position the parents as wrong, but instead utilized the instance as an opportunity to help reconstruct the “problem” as located within the system, not the child.

In order to shift away from the individual child as the problem and generalize the issue within the cultural norms of the school, she then uses herself as an example to shed light on the rigidity of the system as the issue, not individual learning preferences, adaptations, and needs. The shift in conversation both personalizes and depersonalizes the experience to the family. The reframing attempted to help parents shift “the ways in which they have made sense of the world and the dominant norms and values that guide their understandings [about disability] are no longer relevant” (Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008, p. 205). Reframing with parents not only worked to break down power differentials, but it offered an alternative discourse that parents could take from regarding their children’s capabilities in relation to school that wasn’t typically highlighted. Reframing with parents took on multiple nuanced manners and steps, but once educators developed trusting relationships with parents, they were more willing to engage in deeper and more meaningful constructions of disability that recognized the parents’ children as individuals.

Erika’s use of photographs was another powerful mechanism of reframing to provide parents and families with an alternative image of their children not often taken up by the school. Inspired by Rick Guiditto’s work of “Positive Exposure,” Erika decided to
utilize the medium of photography to attempt to reassign boundaries about her students as unique and beautiful.

[Erika]: I was trying to get somebody to come in to take photos of the kids that really showed them as uniquely beautiful. So, a couple of years ago I asked a photographer to come in. I really wanted to give parents an opportunity to see their children in a different light at school. At this age, they (the parents) are so deeply entrenched in language about normal developmental levels and how different they are. They are so new to the system and the way their kids are usually talked about can be so damaging. So I asked a photographer to come in and take pictures to give to the parents. She came in, she took pictures and we gave one to every family. Those photos really ended up affecting every one of the parents. They all bawled; none of them had ever seen their child in that light, especially on a camera. Like obviously this is their child and the see them as unique, but they weren’t able to express that to their family or things in the way she captured them … because she got them so … she was on the playground and she got them to be so natural.

Erika used these as opportunities to rewrite the discursive snapshot that has come to be known and understood as autism. The positive exposure activity provided a powerful recognition of the child as an individual and drove away from the deficit perspective that had been used to relegate disability within particular limited forms for these parents. At the same time, it provided Erika an opportunity to show parents how she herself saw their children as individuals. As Guiditto’s Web site points out, mainstream images of difference are “sad and dehumanizing. In medical textbooks children with a difference
were seen as a disease, a diagnosis first, not as people” (Guiditto, 2012). Images of
disability, whether they came from media representations, language used to describe and
diagnose, or the overall rhetoric prescribed to special education, mirror Guiditto’s
sentiments, where individual bodies became subject to the boundaries of disability. That
is to say that children with disabilities often become perceived within the strict
limitations and identities of disability labels and not as individual people (Collins, 2013).
Regardless of their own beliefs, parents’ impressions of disability have been saturated
with medicalized connotations that are continually reinscribed through their children’s
induction into schooling and the special education process (Taylor, 2008). As a parent of
two children identified with autism and a staunch advocate for a disability studies
perspective, Erika hoped that these more positive representations would help reaffirm and
support parents’ understanding of their children outside of deficit discourses. Although
all educators involved in the study attempted to promote positive representations of their
students to parents and families, it was often limited to their own children, not all
individuals with disabilities.

Parents often took part in discourses that assigned value and hierarchically
positioned their children in relation to other individuals with disabilities they
encountered. Within disability studies, this is commonly known as the hierarchy of
disability (Garland-Thompson, 2009). The phenomenon is aptly highlighted through
Kathie Snow’s (2007) experiences with her son’s disability diagnosis. After finding out
her son was diagnosed with moderate CP, as opposed to severe, Kathie marked her and
her son as being less disabled, and therefore within a better position. She felt as though
she had an advantage over parents of children with more severe disabilities. Nonetheless,
her position of her son in relation to other children identified with disabilities buys into current paradigms of disability that focus on deficit and pity. The practices of categorization and classification reaffirm frameworks of disability that act as barriers to embracing disability as diversity (Minow, 1991). By positioning particular disabilities as better or worse, parents endorse traditional deficit frameworks of disability. Moreover, hierarchical position of disability continues to have serious consequences on physical segregation and social isolation and call into question the humanness of individuals (Routel, 2013). When parents took up an evaluative language of comparison, educators most often diverted the conversation.

[Angela]: This happens a lot, but for example a parent came to me saying “They don’t want their child, I don’t want my student in a class with that student over there because that student is really disabled.”

Carrie: What did you do in those situations?

[Angela]: Well you don’t want to incite it. I would typically steer the conversation back to their child. Say something like “We’re not talking about the other children in the classroom, we’re just talking about the particular needs of your son or daughter. We need to maintain our focus on what supports your son or daughter should access. I’m not going to be talking with you about any other students in the class. Let’s just talk about what you want for your own child.” Somehow they felt that if their student was in a class with maybe someone who is being perceived as lower functioning and they didn’t want their child to be perceived as disabled as that child.
The stratification of particular disabilities as being better or worse contributed to perceptions of disability as a negative quality. Comparing ability (often named by parents as “severity”) with teachers was a consistent discourse that participants confronted. Although Angela’s tactic does not address the issue in a straightforward manner, her shift in the conversation points to her refutation of the privileged positioning of particular disabilities and individuals in relation to others.

Participants did not often directly confront or reframe during conversations about disability hierarchy with parents. Perhaps, as educators, they viewed the issue as less relevant to parents, since it strayed away from their individual relationship. It could be tied to the individualization of disability and continued lack of collective work among individuals across disability categories (Slee, 2011). Disability continues to be categorized as an individual dilemma that is perpetuated through the procedures of special education (Mutua & Smith, 2008; Slee, 2011). The framework for understanding disability also buys directly into the medical model. As Siebers (2006) contends, “the medical model lodges the defect in the individual body and calls for individualized treatment” (p. 12). Special education, a field deeply entrenched in the medical model, continues to contend that it is the individual that is the problem, not the system (Ferri, 2009). Parents therefore take up an evaluative discourse as true through their own affirmation that their child is “less of a problem” as compared to other children with disabilities (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2008). Taking up an evaluative mindset that specifically labels children as more or less of a “problem” stifles attempts at collective understanding (and possibly action) among parents about disability and special education (Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Schneidewind, 2012). During interactions with parents,
educators’ reframing work (such as the one highlighted above) remained at the individual level. Participants chose not to reframe in a more explicit manner and instead focused on guiding the conversation back toward their own child. Although I would argue that choosing to ignore the underlying issue might have been helpful at that moment, it did not work toward their goal of troubling disability. It instead reified certain deficit-based frameworks embedded within disability.

Participants drew from a variety of sources to counter ableist language that focused on deficit and medically based references to students and the system of special education with their colleagues. The subtle movement of the conversation away from connotations that did not endorse students as individuals, but instead constructed them through negative perceptions about disability, was a similar tactic they took up and utilized when engaging with language as a method of re framing.

**Language use.** Overall, participants positioned language as a powerful tool to initiate exposure and reframing with all stakeholders. Participants’ reframing and exposing of alternative language about disability manifested in multiple ways and were utilized initially as a site to counter hegemonic attitudes, behaviors, and actions that continue to permeate deficit discourses of disability and special education (Mutua & Blue-Swadener, 2011; Peters & Reid, 2009). Part of the work involved unpacking culturally assumed stereotypes that position disability, the word itself, as undesirable. As Anna explained:

And I like to say stuff a lot, like I constantly use the word disability and I think a lot of staff and other individuals kind of in my district have like even one of them even said why don’t you call them kids with special needs. At first my partner,
when I first started working with her in the summer she told me that she was offended by people who use the term disability. She said “I’ve always been taught that it’s children with special needs.” And then I talked to her about the term disability and if we don’t use the word disability what does that imply about disabilities. “Is it a bad word, is it something that has such a negative connotation that we can’t even say it. What message does that send?” But she is an extremely open minded individual naturally, she said I totally get what you’re saying. Now she uses the word all the time. I feel like you just have to expose, expose, expose in a way.

As Anna noted with her colleague, disability was perceived as an offensive term. But by taking this opportunity to unpack her colleague’s decision not to utilize the word disability, she was able to unearth what disability has come to signify and the connotations that we as a society have attached to it. As Anna suggests to her colleague, “what message does not using the word send?” Although not explicitly, her denial of the term “special needs” speaks to what the euphemism for disability has come to signify. The word itself purports a particular meaning, which has had serious implications for individuals with disabilities in schools. The use of “special” implies that students with disabilities are in some way inherently unique and different, as compared to their non-disabled peers (Farrell, 2013; Linton, 1998). Further, the term itself continues to be utilized to justify the need for special education and moreover, individuals with disabilities do not name themselves as “special” (Farrell, 2014). By creating a marginalized other through the use of language like “special,” individuals with disabilities in schools become marked by their disability as non-normal; while the
presumption remains that individuals without disabilities in schools are unmarked and their experiences are centered and privileged as normal (Smith, 2010). Instead of continuing to give power to “special,” a word that has been utilized to isolate, dehumanize, and marginalize individuals, Anna chooses to reclaim and utilize the word “disability”. Her reclaiming of “disability” may serve as a “basis [for her own] political activism” (Linton, 1998, p. 12). Similarly, educators chose to reframe deficit-oriented language typically utilized to describe students.

One way participants used language for reframing was the purposeful employment and exchange of more deficit-oriented phraseology for less marginalizing discourse on and about students. Participants believed that by simply swapping words that they perceived were more toxic—such as “severe,” “high,” “low,” “behind,” and “unable” (which were commonly heard when referring to children)—with words that they perceived as less harmful and more specific, they could insert, uninhibitedly, language that acted as a disruptor (Peters & Reid, 2009). For example, Erika asked the members of her classroom to utilize “impacted” as opposed to “low” or “severe” when talking about individual children with colleagues, parents, other children, and one another. Explicit language use and choice were discussed and occurred across a variety of differences, including race, ethnicity, non-native language use, and refugee status.

Through participants’ purposeful use of language, including exposure of individuals to meanings conferred to disability through particular word choices, as well as person-first language, educators were able to reassign boundaries that have been prescribed to disability (Snow, 2009). They discussed a central area that they most often rewrote as official documentation to reflect these ideas.
Explicit conversations about language use occurred periodically with colleagues at transition periods during the year, including on IEPs and report cards. Although participants most often discussed their work on developing person-centered, strength-based, and holistic language on IEPs, I found the conversation between Ava and her co-teacher as consequential to her named identity work. As Ava noticed when doing report card comments, her colleagues’ persistence on emphasizing and demoralizing students who were identified as having disabilities and labeled as learning disabled in reading, writing, and language by a colleague offered an opportunity to reframe.

[Ava]: A minor example was last year my co-teacher would put on the comments for quarterlies and report cards that were biased based on students who were higher and lower.

Carrie: You mean academically?

[Ava]: Yeah, and I would notice that students with disabilities in reading and writing, that on report cards he would write things like has low writing skills, is struggling with reading. So I approached him and told him that, “The parents know that they are struggling in these areas, there’s an IEP in place. You’re being redundant and a little hurtful.”

Carrie: So what did you do?

[Ava]: I just said, “You know this student he struggles in writing, like here his writing sample. His handwriting is very poor. He switches his letters. He inverts them. He writes his B’s, his D’s, as D’s and B’s whatever.” I was like “Can we think of different comments that are more specific?” But instead of him trying to
make the effort, at first, I was in charge of all the comments for anyone with a disability.

At that point, I didn’t really change his mindset. But then halfway through the year we decided to do it together. He did one comment and I did one comment for everyone. I noticed that he didn’t focus in on using the language like low, but instead gave specific examples of where they struggled. I finally got him to change the language. This was more supportive of the students and their growth. Eventually that worked out better.

Although initially, the responsibility of language on report cards was placed on Ava, her suggestion to her colleague about the “hurtful” and “redundant” nature of deficit-based language eventually led to the ELA teacher utilizing less marginalizing language about the students and their abilities on official documentation, as well as more individualized and specific feedback. Since documentation can have a substantial influence on future teachers’ attitudes, and at times, placement (including tracking), Ava’s choice to purposefully reframe the language with the teacher and on the documentation provided her with an opportunity to assert her belief system and maintain future opportunities for her students. It also pointed to the continued work she was doing to maintain reciprocal relationships with parents that were based on both parties’ continued investment in the child. All teachers also described using the common inclusive practice of rewriting IEPs to reflect both humanistic and strength-based descriptions of their students that were more holistic (Causton-Theoharis, 2009). Exposing colleagues and parents to the power of language was a central method that participants chose to engage to reframe and disrupt institutionalized notions of disability and special education.
Evaluating and navigating when and with whom to engage in reframing and exposing made up much of the resistant work that these teachers took up in order to enact their DSE identities. Within these teachers’ identity work, “picking your battles” remained a consistent concept that provided individuals with a purview of power to take from within their individual contexts and situations.

**Working the cracks: “I have to find a way to work within it, even if it is tough.”**

For participants, a central aspect of engaging within their resistance work was having a clear conception and deep understanding of the mechanisms that were part of the systems. In order to assert their identities and take action within the system, they had to know the multiple facets that were part of it and they were dependent on. Participants positioned their use of the knowledge of the systems of special education, both at the legal level and within their individual contexts, as a central method of teaching toward their DSE identities. Their processes of reframing were often discussed in relation to their knowledge of how the systems of public and special education currently operate. Participants’ knowledge not only provided them with a clear understanding of when and with whom to reframe and expose, but it also aided them in developing clear conceptions of which aspects of the system they could use to their own advantage. A large aspect of educators’ ongoing labor of asserting their commitments to DSE was therefore a manipulation of the systems at play toward their will; specifically their decisions to, as Molly called them, “work the cracks” of the system. The teachers described “working the cracks” as a tandem tactic to “picking your battles” that they engaged within in order to move individuals, and the institution, toward a more socially just and DSE framework for understanding.
The phrase “working the cracks” was originally introduced to Molly by a DSE faculty member in her graduate program. Although Molly could not recall what literature the phrase came from, she explained “working the cracks” as a mechanism to utilize at her school site for “…situation[s] that you don’t necessarily agree with but you got to find ways to figure out how to make the best of your situation for your students and for yourself.” The phrase “working the cracks” was borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins’ (2013) work on intellectual activism grounded in Black feminist thought. Simply put, those interested in working toward social justice within bureaucratic systems (such as schools) must use the cracks of the system or insider knowledge to find the spaces and fissures that they can work through and expand upon (Collins, 2013). Collins (2000) used this idea to describe the resistance work of Black women within higher education:

Black women’s success in gaining positions of authority has produced new opportunities to use bureaucratic resources toward humanistic ends. This insider resistance tries to capture positions of authority within social institutions in order to ensure that existing rules will be fairly administered and, if need be, to change existing policies (p. 281).

Although Collins’ framework is situated within Black feminist thought, its use was fitting, as many of the educators described their work as “challenging power structures from the inside of the system…” (Collins, 2013, xiii), which as Collins further elucidates, can only be accomplishable through knowing the system or “…learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly” (p. xiii). The relationship that participants made between their resistance and activism is clearly explained through Yvonne’s claiming of her identity as an Inside Revolutionary.
[Yvonne]: Being an inside revolutionary, I try to develop real relationships with the parents, and try to bring this jumbled IEP language or these intimidating meetings down a bit. I feel like the subtle issues that happen within the school that may be aren’t always the major policy points, such as testing and curriculum, but that affects kids in and out every day … I try to use what I know about how the system works to help my students and parents. I think with special ed there’s a fine line between people who are trying to be helpful and then people who are sort of…they hinder the kids from growing.

Carrie: What does it mean to be an inside revolutionary? What else does that look like?

[Yvonne]: To me that means I have to work in a system. I can choose to not go against the system, become a cog in the system. Or you can choose to stand up against it. The system doesn’t always support what I believe. But I have to find a way to work within it, even if it is tough. I have to find ways to support parents understanding of special education. To support my students success within the system by using it to their benefit.

Essentially, as Molly and Yvonne described, they have to find ways to work against the system while remaining within it in order to assert their underlying DSE identities. To participants, “making the best of your situation” meant and depended on both figuring out and knowing intimately the structures and mechanisms within the system of special and public education that supported their campaign, along with the points at which the system was more flexible.
For participants, the tactic of “working the cracks” provided a modicum of agency in taking up their identities. The use of the system by participants “create[d] a certain play in the machine through a stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning” (de Certeau, 1989, p. 30). The machine, or the mechanisms embedded within the systems of special and public education, become the inroads for operationalizing the identity in a meaningful way to support students, parents, and families toward more humanistic and strength-based supports, services, and opportunities. Through their deep knowledge, they were able to “find ways of using the constraining order of the place” (de Certeau, p. 1989, p. 30). Further:

Without leaving the place [public and special education] where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him [the participants], he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By the art of in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.” (p. 30).

By recognizing and using the systems at play toward their own agenda, they were able to disrupt the place of the other (the systems of special and public education), to both assert their identity in a meaningful way and maintain a positive sense of self (de Certeau, 1989). One such area of resistance work that relied on the system was participants’ use of special education procedures and laws as a tactic to move students away from more restrictive settings.

**Having a firm grounding in the law and procedures of special education.** The participants’ utilization of the mechanisms and structures of the system toward practices and services more aligned with DSE was an approach consistently taken up to challenge current practices and cultures within their schools and districts. In general, participants
used these tactics to support the inclusion of students by teachers who taught in more restricted settings, but they were also taken up in a variety of other contexts and in a variety of other manners. Participants struggled with their colleagues’ failure to start from a place that presumed the competence of their students. Beginning from a place that presumed competence was a pronounced aspect and central to the experiences of teachers working within self-contained classes, with students who were identified with the most complex disabilities. Many participants posited that students were simply not included because of long-held beliefs and assumptions, not because of a particular need. In order to unearth their schools’ procedures around placement, part of the resistance work done by participants involved coming to understand and know how the procedures and systems of special education worked within their specific contexts.

Shortly after our second interview, Molly emailed me, excited about a tactic she had taken up to make the systems of service placement within her school more transparent. She and her co-teacher, the other elementary-level teacher of students identified with significant disabilities, had begun to openly question the criteria and process by which students were determined to receive special education services within their school and district. She and her co-teacher had begun to publically challenge what they believed were discriminatory service placement practices within team and IEP/CSE meetings to begin to unearth and navigate why “students that didn’t fit within the co-teaching model were automatically put in our room[s].” Molly and her co-teachers were the only teachers not included in the whole school—they had even won an award for their inclusion of students identified with ELL by the state. The administrators and team members hadn’t yet openly admitted that their presumptions about students with more
complex disabilities were the only reason why these groups of students were segregated. Molly felt that being open and directly challenging long-held practices would offer her a mechanism toward clarity. She strongly believed that engaging in direct and challenging questioning would lead to more salient opportunities for her to use the understanding of the methods of placement decision making within her school and district. A clear understanding of the structures and systems of service options and placement offered Molly a means of transparency that she believed would eventually support the inclusion of her students and her continued identity work within her school.

Another way participants leveraged the system was through their use of the law to support advocacy efforts. Participants drew on their understanding of the law, most often when the inclusion or success of students within general education was being threatened in some way. For example, when Lyra’s students’ opportunities for being included within general education were threatened because of the absence of 1:1 paraprofessionals, she utilized her knowledge of law to ensure continuing access. As she explained:

Like my fifth graders could access general education for science, social studies, language arts, and part of that. But they’re not going to the classes because they have no one to go with them to the class, we don’t have enough 1:1’s. But really they just need someone to walk them to class and make sure that they are on task while they are there. They all [her students] have minutes allocated in their IEP for general education services, but the district is refusing to send paraprofessionals because of money. So I am currently in conversations with my administration. Basically, I say, “Look just because you don’t have money for this doesn’t mean you can deny a service. That’s like the law 101.”
But it’s not even as simple as that. It’s reminding them [the administration] that there is law in place and I am held responsible to it, not providing services that are on the IEP comes on my shoulders. The thing that is making me crazy is that my principal is saying to me “Well if they need a full paraprofessional all day, they shouldn’t be in general education at all, they should be in your room.” And that to me is sick. It doesn’t make any sense to say, ‘oh if they need a lot of support they should be in your room all day.’ No, that’s not how the law is written. The law is written to say if they need a lot of support then they can still access general education. Again it’s law basics 101.

Lyra used her knowledge of the law in multiple ways to ensure her students had access to general education. First, she used her understanding of the IEP as a legally binding document to advocate for both services that were present within the IEP, inclusion within general education and paraprofessionals. Although the administration’s insistence on paraprofessionals to access general education is called into question, it is not entirely dismissed; instead, this notion is utilized to hold the school further legally accountable. She then appropriated the law to dismiss her principal’s misunderstanding of supplemental supports and services or the full-day paraprofessional as a justification for service within a self-contained classroom. Eventually, as Lyra noted during our second interview, the students were included for the majority of content areas and had been provided with paraprofessionals. Another manner in which participants used their understanding of the law and special education was accomplished through tactical efforts with parents.
A large aspect of participants’ tactical work was the advocacy work that teachers took up with parents. Participants spent ample amounts of time dedicated to communicating and making the law and the processes of special education more transparent to parents. Educators used the law to support parent endeavors. They let parents know of their rights, provided specific guidance on those rights, and showed parents how the system could be utilized toward their own desires for their children. Participants expressed a desire to make parents feel comfortable and assured parents by reminding them that if at any time they felt that the services were in any way inappropriate or not meeting the needs of their children, they had, as Ava stated, “the law to back them up.” Participants understood the power that parents and families had to advocate for particular services and rights that they themselves did not have as educators. As Theresa stated, “more often than not if a parent called I’d get more action than me waving my flag.” They also reminded parents that the way that the system was set up could benefit their advocacy initiatives, as Nina suggested to a parent during a recent conversation:

I told the parent we can look into OT evaluations but I said honestly “If that comes from you it will be looked into and get done quicker, because if it’s coming from a parent the school tends to respect it more.” And she was kind of like “Oh” and she didn’t really know that.

Parents could, as participants acknowledged, work the system in their favor much easier than educators could. Participants saw specific elements of the law as clear opportunities for advocacy for parents and therefore used this tactic to assert and maintain alignment with DSE identity. Part of knowing and manipulating the system was therefore making
parents aware of their own power through awareness of their rights and resources in the community that could support their advocacy.

Foremost, participants wanted parents to know that they had rights that were guaranteed to them and their children, even in situations where parents felt their rights for advocating seemed unlikely.

[Lyra]: Well you know, it’s tough for parents [of children] with behavior disabilities to advocate … this one parent came to me because she wanted her son to be challenged and in more general education classes, and he can totally do it, no problem. But her son recently got a school suspension because he pretended to shoot the art teacher, which was ridiculous anyway. I think she (the parent) felt too shy to say to the principal you know I want my kid in general education after he’s just done this bad thing.

Carrie: What do you do in situations like that?

[Lyra]: Yeah, I mean what I say to them when they say oh I’m sorry, so-and-so did this. I’m like “You know what, we all have tough days. When I get mad I throw things. When I get mad I yell. You know I say don’t be embarrassed, don’t be embarrassed. No matter what your child does they have rights and we can enact them. Don’t feel like you can’t advocate for your child that is also your right.” She said “Oh” and she didn’t really know that.

Part of it is that some of the parents are really hard to connect with—they alienate themselves from school for whatever reason. Maybe they had a bad experience themselves. I think people see teachers as authority figures, especially if they
come from a different class bracket or a different racial bracket. I want to kind of get away from that [being positioned as an authority] as much as possible.

My program really is for kids who are so discrepant and that’s all many of these parents have heard. What I want parents to understand and realize is that their child is a member of the school community, and the community has legal obligations to support them. And this is how we can get that done.

Relationships between teachers and parents remained the foundation of the exchange between Lyra and the parent. At first, Lyra attempted to bolster the relationship by developing a sense of mutual reciprocity with parents through her attempts at breaking down the power differential and then using the opening as an opportunity to support the parents’ efforts in advocacy. She did this in part by reminding the parent that even though the child might have engaged in behavior that got them suspended, parents still have rights that were guaranteed. The failure on the school’s part to adequately let the parents know about their rights is somewhat frightening, since Lyra teaches students in 4th, 5th, and 6th grade. What, if any, opportunities had the parent had to exercise her and her child’s rights within this school district? Lyra used the occasion to reassure the parent that the school has a legal obligation to help guide the parent on next steps. A large aspect of participants’ work was, therefore, asserting and explaining to parents that they had legal entitlements that protected parents’ rights to advocate and support their use of the law (Valle & Connor, 2011). Participants positioned educating parents about their rights as not only their responsibility as teachers, but as a best practice. Participants engaged in educating parents about their rights in numerous ways that included providing online tools and apps that parents could utilize, advising them on how to explicitly use the law
during critical points of the IEP/CSE process, and pointing them to advocacy organizations within the surrounding community.

Participants frequently discussed their utilization of community advocacy centers to support parents’ efforts in advocating using the law. Community resources were utilized to ensure parents weren’t taken advantage of by school officials, especially in instances when districts attempted to exert their power in ways with which educators and parents did not agree. One such instance was when a parent called Angela crying after the district attempted to use manipulative tactics to move her child to a more restrictive setting.

[Angela]: She [a parent] called me crying and she told me ‘The district sent her a letter saying that if she didn’t agree with some assessments for her son that our district was going to file a due process against her.’

Carrie: Why?

[Angela]: Just because she was refusing to have him tested and the district wanted to use that [the assessment] as a grounds for a more restrictive environment. This is a Hispanic low socio-economic single mom who is being bullied. So I said to her very succinctly, I said, “you know I am so sorry that this is happening for you and for your son. Did you have a representative from regional center?” which is like the local support.

She said “No,” she said “It’s the first time that my regional center rep[resentative] got shifted and couldn’t make it at the last minute.” Then she started crying and she goes “I went into that meeting and I’ve always known everybody and I didn’t know a single person in the room. And something was fishy; because I could have
been there but literally five minutes before the meeting the district administrator came in and told me we don’t need you to sign at that meeting. I should have known something was up.’”

I said “You know” I said “What you need to do is you need to call your regional center rep up. You need to tell your regional center rep exactly what happened. You need to gather all of your documentation that you have, make copies of it, give it to your regional center rep, and you need to make sure that your regional center rep finds an advocate for you. I wouldn’t attend a single IEP meeting ever without someone to advocate for you.” because you know she missed pieces of it because her English … you know she couldn’t quite catch up with her English. Her English is beautiful but she is still working on it. But in a meeting like that it was just very intimidating for her.

Without a translator, the parent was at a severe disadvantage; Angela understood that. Educators often relied on established community organizations and parent groups to provide sustained and systematic support to parents in their advocacy, as Angela had recommended. Angela helped support their continued use of the system through her insistence on providing an advocate at every meeting. Angela did not want the parent to be taken advantage of and therefore offered a solution that she believed could provide ongoing and sustained support. Participants also discussed their own work as advocates for parents outside of their own district. Although at first I thought it was a little odd that they would engage in advocacy work outside of their district (but not in their own), it made more sense after discovering their fear of losing particular ties and opportunities within their own district. They had to, as mentioned by Anna (earlier in this chapter) and
both Nina and Veronica (in Chapter 4), maintain an appearance of adherence to the unwritten and hidden rules of the school in order to continue to make strides within it.

In instances when colleagues questioned the placement of a student within regular or general education (even students without a special education label), participants utilized these opportunities as natural inroads to challenge and expose colleagues to new beliefs about the purposes of special education and disability labels. Exposure of this nature came up most often when colleagues positioned the role of the special education or self-contained service as a viable solution for dealing with students who they thought were struggling within their general education class. One way participants confronted these presumptions was to use the system and procedures of special education. When a colleague approached Angela about putting a struggling student on an alternative assessment, Angela described how she utilized the conversation as an opportunity to reframe using the law.

[Angela]: She [the colleague] asked can we have an IEP to excuse the student from taking the test in the spring.

Carrie: Wow.

[Angela]: I know it’s always horrifying having conversations like that. But I can remember, it would be like so-and-so has an IEP. A lot of times there is the assumption that they’re already excused from taking the test. My favorite one is when they say “They don’t take the test the normal kids do because they have an IEP, right?” And I’m like “No, they take the same tests that the all of the kids do.” Then the conversation moved onto the teacher telling me, “I don’t think so-and-so is going to do very well, is there any way that we can, like, excuse them for taking
the test. You test them every year, don’t you? Can’t we just use your testing?”

Well typically in those instances and this one in particular, I just usually typically will refer to the law. I might say something like, “Well legally we can’t just have the kids not take the test. They need to take it.” And, again, like I said, this is the real high SES area and there’s a lot of litigation. If you bring up that it is illegal to the teacher, the teachers usually back off.

Carrie: Have you used it in other ways, that litigation idea?

[Angela]: Well yeah because I’ve had teachers … now as a resource teacher I had a teacher the other day who wants to put this student into special day class who honestly is doing grade level work. The kid is squirrely and all over the map and the teacher is pushing to have him placed in a special day class.

So then I explained legally you know we need to give him least restrictive environment and he only comes to me for forty-five minutes a day. I then asked if he struggling in all of his other subjects and I’m asking for his grades, and his grades are fine. But she’s getting frustrated because his ADHD is off the chart, and yes he’s a challenge.

With both educators, Angela unpacked the presumption about special education and labels to reframe these general educators’ beliefs about students who received special education services. As Angela demonstrated, when colleagues undoubtedly pointed to special education as a space for kids struggling within general education, participants essentially utilized the system and mechanisms of special education to their advantage by exposing facets of the law or procedures that maintained the rights of the students.

Although these conversations were most often initiated when talking about an individual
student, they also served as chances for reformulating generalized prescriptions of disability and special education.

Reframing was often done in tandem with challenging the belief or assumption of responsibility that these general educators were placing on students who struggled. Participants used these as opportunities to expose colleagues to alternative dialogues about the student that moved toward more positive, strength-based, and contextualized snapshots of the child. The participants’ focus on the individual students also aided in the facilitation of dialogues that supported the utilization of a plurality of methods to support the movement of a particular child into the general education classroom based on critical aspects of the IEP. Anna’s use of IEP goals to consider a less restrictive placement for a student with autism exemplifies the maneuvering of the system toward her will. She explained how she generally used a questioning and reframing strategy in CSE meetings:

If I go in and I say Johnny only has two academic goals. All the rest of his goals are social-emotional. You know there’s no reason that he should be in like 60% self-contained and 40% gen. education. We really should consider pushing him into the general education population more. We can’t look at segregation as a teaching strategy.

Then I would say like well let’s look at this. What if we said he only needs an hour of pull out a day? There’s no reason his needs can’t be met based on these goals. These goals could definitely drive placement in general education.

I understand that he has different stims going on. I try to address what I know concerns the team, like he’s blurtling out constantly or he has this constant verbal
stim that he can’t control or whatever. I understand that, however we can put all these structures and supports in place to help him.

When the teacher is like well I tried that already and that doesn’t work, or we can try it but I’m not convinced that it will work, then I’ll say but you know what if you had a child that was deaf in their class and you had to assign somebody who interpreted sign language the whole entire time. You wouldn’t want that child not to be in your class just because they needed someone to interpret. It’s okay, it’s different and then you try to use different examples to kind of counteract what their mindset is. Like a child with autism versus a child that has a hearing impairment.

Instead of focusing on the identified problem of the child as inhibiting access to the general education classroom, Anna changed the focus to the teacher. In this instant, the onus of responsibility moved from the child to the educator and how she or he might alter her or his practice. Finally, she linked the structures and supports that Johnny might utilize to access the general education content and class to a more widely accepted disability accommodation that could easily be seen as visible discrimination. As Anna suggested, why wouldn’t you provide someone with a sign language interpreter if they were hearing impaired? Her exposure to the stratification of the varying worth we place on accommodations and adaptations based on disability made it very difficult for someone to counteract her statement. Conversations like these helped reframe the salience of disability labels in driving placement and service. They were often paired with specific discussion and integration of best practices, including differentiation, universal design, and natural supports, to ensure the success of students. Participants’ experiences
challenging colleagues’ beliefs about their students’ abilities was a consistent struggle.

Participants’ manipulation and utilization of the procedures and law of special education toward their own goals were a consistent tactic that was employed to either move students out of and/or keep them from being serviced within more restrictive segregated settings.

The teachers’ appropriation of their knowledge of these systems was taken up in their attempts to provide more inclusive services to their students, a central aspect of DSE. They believed that only through the meaningful exposure and inclusion of all students would they be able to change pervasive attitudes about disability and special education. Although their attempts yielded both successful and unsuccessful outcomes, their understanding and use of the processes and procedures of the system enabled them to find ways to manipulate that system in a way that supported their continued identity maintenance. Participants’ leveraging of the law and aspects of special education toward advocacy initiatives that supported the inclusion of students, or their “working the cracks,” provided tangible opportunities to use the systems of special and public education to support and maintain their identity as DSE.

**Talking back without assurance**

Although the educators most often engaged in reframing selectively and leveraged their understanding and knowledge of the systems of special and public education, there were instances in which educators decided to talk back to colleagues outside of the aforementioned frameworks of “picking your battles” and “working the cracks.” Although many of these instances of talking back without assurance began with an attempt to utilize tactics that they had found successful in the past, participants were often
left without these tactical methods of brokering their everyday lives. In particular, their
decisions to speak up with colleagues were not taken lightly. Instead, their desire to stay
true to themselves as individuals, both at the professional and personal level, left
speaking out without the use of these tactics unavoidable at times. Participants discussed
these moments with anguish. Speaking out without caution, ignoring the weight of
consequences, and not using the system toward their will most often occurred when
educators noticed blatant discrimination that would result in serious educational
consequences and missed opportunities for their students. The impetus of talking back
without assurance most often occurred around behavior.

Yvonne recalled an instance last year in which her school was trying to push a
student into a notoriously segregated space that the large metropolitan district she worked
in had relegated to students with disabilities who were deemed unable to benefit from
service within a less restrictive environment.

[Yvonne]: Mentally getting through it sometimes is tough. I have had my
moments with the system. It’s really not about the kids. It’s about other things that
we have in place that make it really difficult to try something new or go against
what we have perceived as normal. The system, it seems is sometimes set up to
really screw you over in those instances. Last year I had a student and I love this
kid, he was the youngest boy in my class. He was very immature. He would do
things that you would expect from children that are younger than him, sucking his
thumb, those sorts of things. But when he got mad, if someone was laughing or
something, the next thing you know he was cursing, flipping over desks, and
having a meltdown.
By the time I had him he was in third grade, he had been in the school, our school, already for two years previous. Everyone was pretty familiar with him. But as soon as I got him I was talking to the guidance counselor and I was trying to make a plan for when and if he had outbursts. Basically she said ‘Anytime he does anything you call for an ambulance.’ I found out that the hope was, if we called the ambulance enough, the mom would get tired of it and put him in District 75 … That was the district’s plan of attack. The school had already called the ambulance on him before and they had already established that mom didn’t pick him up from the hospital until nine or ten o’clock at night. She couldn’t leave work to get him.

It became a really toxic environment because I’d never called the ambulance on him. I refused, I just didn’t. Being honest with you, there were days when he came into school that I could tell he was just off and hadn’t taken his medication. He really wasn’t ready to be in the classroom. In those instances, I just sent him to another classroom to start the day with a paraprofessional to chill out. I knew if he came in the classroom right away, it was going to result in an episode that would end up having the administration involved, which would result in the ambulance being called.

I felt like I wasn’t supported by her [the guidance counselor] or the administration. We were on different sides about what to do about it. He didn’t have supports that he needed. If I went to go to her and ask if he could come in and talk to her, she would exploit that.

Carrie: You mean she would call the ambulance?
[Yvonne]: Right, because she thought it would be better if he was in district 75. School became a really messed up environment, I was constantly arguing back and forth with the guidance counselor about you know this, that, and the third. I couldn’t even go and talk to her, even though she provided services to him. I couldn’t use her to support him because she didn’t want the same things as me. I kept bringing up that this wasn’t working. This ambulance thing wasn’t a solution.

Even in the school team became really frustrated. We were trying to do something but so many people are blocking you or not on the same page.

Yvonne’s decision to go against and consistently speak up against the school’s decision to misuse and misappropriate the system in a method that would ultimately segregate the child was not an easy one. But the school’s organized efforts in using the ambulance and denial of service (via guidance counselor) was extremely troubling. Although she had attempted to first leverage her relationship, Yvonne came to understand that the guidance counselor was not open to alternative discourses about the child; nevertheless, she continued to stand her ground. Yvonne could not ignore or carefully wade through the agenda of the guidance counselor and school to exploit the mother. The denial of services was not only against the law but could lead to harsh consequences for the child. Even though it made little difference with the guidance counselor, Yvonne continued to talk back to the issue. She also found ways to support the child outside of the damaging mechanisms that the school suggested. The decision to blatantly speak out against a colleague or an administratively championed idea was a difficult one. Nonetheless, when
it came to the school’s blatant discrimination and abuse of the system toward parents and families, participants felt it was necessary to maintain their stance.

A similar situation occurred with Nina when the school had decided to single out a child who exhibited challenging behavior but had not yet been identified as having a disability. As Nina recalled:

There’s this kid in second grade and he’s having some very, very severe behavior problems. I worked with him, and he’s not even like on my caseload and he doesn’t have an IEP, but I would see him in the halls and I would like talk to him and he’s like this little … like a whiz. He knows everything and he’s so articulate, but he would like blow up, like throw chairs and they would have to clear the room. But talking to him afterward and he’d say ‘I was feeling so frustrated that I just picked up a chair and I threw it. I didn’t mean to but I lost control.’

The problem was is that my principal had made this decision that he was going to go into like the self-contained room. He doesn’t have an IEP, so I was kind of a little like muddy about the legality of that. And the teacher wasn’t doing anything different to support behavior. So I disagreed with the principal. I said you know “This is really shitty because this is a teacher problem, this is not a kid problem. He was amazing last year. Oh and he’s amazing this year, but is not supported. Last year went so well last year because his teacher was an experienced teacher and had routines, and the class had expectations, and he had individualized behavior supports when he was feeling frustrated. He had a space to go to and take breaks when he needed to.”
I said, “This is an adult problem, this is not his problem and he should not have to move out of the room. We’re saying that he has a disability if he goes in that room, yet he hasn’t been formally diagnosed. And we’re putting him in a situation where he is probably not going to excel. You go in there and there’s like six adults, seven adults or something, and kids are running around.”

I said “Is that really the best environment, why can’t we provide more support to this teacher that also provide him more support in the classroom? Why is that not an option? We’re giving him … we’re putting him in a different location because he doesn’t fit in to what’s happening instead of providing more support in the classroom.”

So she understood. She said she understood, but he still had to leave. There were no supports put into the classroom and now he’s in self-contained classroom all day long, and he’s actually moving to even more restrictive environment. He’s going to another school, that’s only for I guess kids with like severe like mental illness and behavior.

Although Nina had previously worked closely with this administrator and had some success in moving the school toward more inclusive service provision, it seems as though in many schools, behavior may not be part of that inclusive philosophy. As both Nina and Yvonne’s experiences illustrate, students who exhibit behavior are perceived to need more restrictive segregated settings (Bejoin & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2007). Nina’s decision to confront and attempt to reframe the principal’s decision was done through clear placement of the issue on the practices of the teacher, not on the behavior of the child. Even though Nina was ultimately unsuccessful, facing instances of discrimination,
she was presented with a situation that neither she nor Yvonne could ignore even if decisions had already been made. Only through continuing to push the issue with her principal could Nina maintain an underlying commitment to her belief systems as an educator. Although dissimilar from Yvonne’s experience of talking out, because of Nina’s principal’s recognition of her viewpoint, both attempted to address serious issues of marginalization without the usual caution that was associated with more tactical approaches. Nonetheless, speaking out without assurance was difficult for educators who were already extremely constrained by the system.

Behavior perceived as challenging and disruptive continues to serve as a justification for marginalization (Bejoin & Reid, 2005; Curcic et al., 2011). Faced with similar instances, participants felt the need to assert their identities no matter the consequence. Even though educators initially attempted to utilize more tactical approaches that had been successful in other contexts, within situations involving behavior, unfortunately, both educators were unable to reframe or expose their colleagues to alternative frameworks. Both educators confronted the conflicts to their ideology and pushed beyond tactics. Both educators knew the lifelong consequences associated with placement within more restrictive settings, particularly for students of color who exhibit challenging behavior. Students of color who exhibit behavior perceived as challenging or disruptive are more often excluded or expelled from school (Gaylord et al., 2005). They are more likely not to graduate and be incarcerated (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011).

Because participants both believed in inclusion and understood these long-term consequences of particular forms of exclusion related to behavior, even when tactical attempts were not successful, they still spoke out. Speaking out, particularly regarding
instances centered on behavior, however, did not seem to make a difference, as both educators were unsuccessful in these endeavors. Nonetheless, participants felt that if they did not push these issues further, they were giving into the mechanisms of the system that they were attempting to disrupt. Although their attempts were not successful, they decided to continue push beyond tactics to promote the continued inclusion of these students. These instances of speaking up were difficult in comparison to those they described as “picking your battles” and/or “working the cracks,” but at the same time educators more often than not felt emotional strain because of not speaking out.

**Limitations of participants’ re-framing and exposing framework for resistance**

The educators involved in this study positioned the tactics of “working the cracks” and “picking your battles” as methods of ensuring ongoing and marked progress toward spaces that were more aligned with the tenets of DSE. Participants’ frameworks of resistance offered individuals an opportunity to “foster counter-hegemonic understandings and employ discursive (re)positionings [that] aimed at changing both what can be said and what can be done and by whom” (Peters & Reid, 2009, p. 556). The teachers believed that as individuals they could make ongoing and marked progress toward equity and inclusion. Their hope was that through these small, successful, and positive exposures, along with their ongoing relationships, that individuals and institutions would attach worth to the re-framing of disability and special education. As teacher identity theories posit, individuals must assign value to alternative frameworks for viewing the world in order to consider and internalize these ideas as viable ways of viewing the world (Musanti & Pense, 2010; Olsen, 2008; Sutherland et al., 2010). Only through perceiving these ideas as meaningful and worthwhile would it alter and become
part of their identities (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Educators hoped that these small, nuanced, and often opportunistic ways of reframing and exposing would provide a foundation for imagined possibilities, even at the individual level. Their resistant work with colleagues and parents provided them with meaningful opportunities to assert their DSE identities in satisfying, and often tangible, ways. Nonetheless, educators also felt extremely limited in what they could do on a daily basis.

Although participants maintained a shred of power through these instances of reframing, they felt extremely constrained by the system. The use of selective reframing and exposure as a tactic was not without anguish. Daily, they encountered instances of oppression that they felt strongly against but did not respond to directly. Personally, participants wrestled internally with remaining silent, the repercussions of which will be further discussed in chapter 6. Their framework for resistance was limited by their perceived vulnerability in the system and fears about retaining working relationships with colleagues and their schools.

Although researchers and professionals within the field of education often characterize resistance in larger-than-life efforts involving taking on discrimination, participants did not have the space to perform their identities in that matter. Many of the central aspects of DSE are in direct opposition to their work as public school teachers. Their work within special and public education often depends on deficit discourses that are part of the dominant medical model of disability. Participants consistently felt as though their actions were restricted by what they could do, when they could do it, and whom they could trust because of the distance between DSE and the current and continued framework of public schooling and special education. These teachers were
aware that they did not have the freedom to fully enact their DSE identities within the current school system. The tension they endured in their transgressive work was related to choosing with which instances their belief systems and values mattered most and deciding when to assert their DSE identities. Conceding to the system while knowing how power worked in public and special education at their schools and districts made them feel abject.
In the previous two chapters, I discuss how educators took up, practiced, and named their DSE identities in relation to their daily lives within their classrooms and in school with students, colleagues, and parents. Both chapters point to the complex navigations and negotiations that participants engaged in to maintain a positive sense of self within environments that have been marked by the discourses and practices of special education and continue to be increasingly saturated by demands that compete with their DSE identities. The increased pressures associated with performance, accountability, and standardization that currently inundate the processes of teaching and learning within public schools often act as direct barriers to the manifestation of their identities within schools. As evidenced by previous chapters’ discussions, traversing these educational terrains proved to be an arduous task that left many of the participants finding it progressively more difficult to maintain absolute fidelity to and assert their underlying DSE belief systems. Even so, because these teachers believed at their core in developing a space for and breaking down commonsense notions about disability, special education, and the purposes of schooling, they continued to find ways to practice DSE. Maintaining fidelity to their underlying belief systems was accomplished not only through the daily work within schools and classrooms that was previously discussed, but through participants’ utilization and leverage of multiple and varied sources of support. For my
participants, therefore, social support networks acted as the collaborative crux for continuing to engage and find sustained meaning in their ongoing labor and resistance.

Teacher support networks, face-to-face and virtual, as well as direct and indirect, acted as tangible mechanisms for educators’ daily transgressive work. In order to unearth the networks that participants drew on, this chapter will lay out the multitude of social support systems that educators discussed as meaningful to their identity maintenance. This will include discussion of the explicit impact that administrator support had on educators’ overall experiences in schools. Conversely, it will also address what the absence of such support had on individuals’ beliefs and perspectives about their sustenance within the profession. Finally, it will describe the role that these networks played in participants’ feelings of longevity in asserting their values and beliefs within their public school roles.

The chapter is broken up into three sections. The first section will discuss the various social support networks that participants drew on and described as valuable to their continuing resistance and identity work. The second section will illustrate the critical importance of administrator support in strengthening participants’ efforts and experiences in enacting their overarching identity within their respective schools and districts. Finally, I will discuss the relationships that participants articulated between support and their discussion on retention and their own professional aspirations for maintaining identities aligned with DSE. To begin, I will provide a brief overview and define key aspects of participants’ utilization of teacher support networks in relation to enabling opportunities for social justice and transgressive teaching work.
Participants’ social support networks: “They are my rocks and they keep me focused on keeping my stance.”

Literature in teacher education notes that teachers utilize various types of network groups and professional communities within and outside of their schools to engage in dialogue, reflexive problem solving, and professional development to support their ongoing and continuing work as teachers (Lee & Shari, 2012; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1993; Montaño & Burstein, 2006). These groups have been documented as occurring at the local, national, and international levels, both formally and informally, in-person and virtually, and are entities that exist throughout and across public schools (Ritchie, 2012).

In the case of transgressive and social justice oriented work, teacher network groups and professional communities provide an opportunity to legitimate teachers’ critically conscious understandings of schooling and engage in sustained inquiry to support teachers’ practicing of their critical identities (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Teacher network groups and professional communities often function to construct an area where politically aligned and like-minded teachers come together to “collaborate with one another to prevent isolation, offer emotional support, and share teaching ideas around social justice themes” (Ritchie, 2012, p. 122). Social justice orientated teacher groups provide a space for teachers who are working toward creating and shifting education as a site of change to engage in group “reflection and action [to act] upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). Thus, teacher networks, no matter the form, provide teachers with critical communities of practice that offer meaningful tools to support their continuing resistance and activism (Montaño & Burnstein, 2006). For my participants, these social and material support networks “…played a [clear] role in sustaining their critical teaching
practice as they came together to share resources and teaching strategies, and take action in the community around social and political issues” (Ritchie, 2012, p. 122).

Based on their individual and collective discussions, I define the structures and methods of support that participants drew on collectively as social support networks and resources. I classify these systems in this manner because, overwhelmingly, all of the mechanisms of support that educators drew on and from could be characterized in some way or another as interactive; the means of support they described were all based on and accomplished through their close relationships and utilization of either individual(s), group(s), and/or other social exchanges, both in-person and virtually. Although research has exceedingly focused on the physical and literal meeting of individuals as the defining perimeters of teacher support networks and professional groups, recent studies, along with the continuing evolution and reliance on technology (including virtual communication and interaction), point to the variable networks and resources that teachers utilize to sustain, expand, and connect with like-minded individuals in their transgressive work (Leung & Lee, 2005; Merchant, 2012). This research, along with these findings, corroborates and expands on the multitude of networks and systems that are being made available to and used by practicing teachers. Participants leveraged a variety of social support networks that afforded each valuable and meaningful resource to support and nurture their underlying belief systems. As literature on teacher support networks has suggested, educators’ first level of support came primarily from like-minded individuals who shared core critical beliefs about teaching, diversity, education, inclusion, and difference.
Like-minded colleagues. Educators who participated in this study consistently and repeatedly discussed like-minded individuals as regular and frequent sources of support that they sought out in their daily identity and resistance work. By and large, participants depended on like-minded individuals who were classified as either colleagues within their school or district and/or who were part of their disability studies cohort and program. Whether it was one, two, or a few individuals, participants utilized these individuals and groups as sounding boards to both problem-solve (figure out solutions to specific issues that came up in their daily teaching) and problematize (discuss aspects of public school and special education that misaligned with their underlying beliefs) their roles and identities within schools in order to stay true to themselves within their current school and classroom contexts. Support from like-minded colleagues most often occurred at the informal level, meaning not in a structured and/or formal group (Ritchie, 2012). Ava described two teachers that she saw as part of her social support network in her school when we discussed how the culture of her school building impeded many of her attempts to move toward more inclusive service provision.

[Ava]: It’s hard when you’re one of the only ones doing that [trying to change the culture of the school].

Carrie: Yeah, if there is not that building and district level understanding or that coalition among the staff to create that type of culture.

[Ava]: Yeah, but there are only a few of them. My one friend Stacy and my other friend Melissa were definitely very similar to me, and then the ELA instructional coach (who was my mentor) … My mentor has helped me immensely and he’s also the ELA instructional coach this year. He is my go-to guy for anything that I
need help on … They are my rocks and they keep me focused on keeping my
stance. They’re literally the only people in the school who do. If I didn’t have that
[support] I would quit.

Reciprocal relationships with like-minded progressive individuals, like those that Ava
described, supported a critical community of practice (Montaño & Burnstein, 2006).
These individuals, whether within participants’ schools and districts or not, were
perceived as lifelines to their daily work and continuing practice. But that did not
necessarily mean that they also shared a DSE identity or background. Individuals with
whom participants aligned themselves did not have to have a background in DSE, but had
to believe in schooling as a site for social justice. In general, participants described these
“like-minded individuals” as being progressive educators, who had either the same or
similar values or beliefs, although their colleagues often depended on other underlying
critical education theories. Their relationships were based on a mutual understanding of
and approach to schooling as a critical site for inclusion, resistance, and change
(Zeichner, 2009). Their shared purpose and perspectives supplied participants with a
critical community of practice that facilitated a space where they could engage in
reflexive dialogue and problematize their work as progressive teachers (Lee & Shari,
2012; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1993).

Participants described these individuals (cohort and in district/school) as
compatible sources for shared opportunities and engagement with lifelong learning,
reflection, collaboration, problem solving, member checking, and at times, venting. As a
result, educators shared that opportunities to engage in frequent and ongoing
conversations or dialogues with these individuals were valuable to their own sustenance.
Dialogue with like-minded individuals provided participants with ongoing opportunities to practice convergent thinking, as well as collectively orchestrate and sustain each other’s critically conscious belief systems and teaching practices (Sachs, 2003). Sharing experiences and challenges were significant aspects of these relationships. As Yvonne stated:

[Yvonne]: We [her colleague and she] have very similar views. We have conversations about disability and race. We were just talking about overrepresentation and the social construction of disability and race … But we also talk about how to best support kids and we don’t always agree. But because I know where her heart and mindset is, I know she’s not looking at the kids in a negative way … She’s really just concerned about what’s the best thing to do for each child, the best path. And that is not always clear cut…

Nina discussed a relationship with a like-minded colleague similarly:

[Nina]: Lindsey’s my mentor. I have a school psychologist that’s my mentor. I have all these teachers in the school that have been here. You know I have this group of people that I can look to … but Lindsey’s great because she thinks like I do. Huge advocate for disability studies. We have that shared language that we both came in with. We didn’t have to teach each other that part. We both have that common understanding and real passion. That’s been amazing because you don’t always have people like that. She even said to me, “I’m just so grateful for you because you just think like I do. It’s so nice to have somebody to talk to about this stuff … you need to have that person that you can talk to about it.”
For me I can be a confident person and I am with disability. Other than that I’m not the most, but it’s nice having someone else to like support what you’re saying, backing it up.

And you’re not necessarily growing in your own way unless you’re doing more research, you’re reading books, or watching blogs. If you’re not doing that and you’re just always the teacher (not the learner) … I want to continue learning and growing … I am the only one besides Lindsey that thinks this way. But I want to be making sure that I’m still up to date on what’s the correct or appropriate … and she pushes to me to do that.

Yvonne and Nina positioned their co-workers as trusted and like-minded individuals. They engaged in mutually beneficial critical conversations. In Yvonne’s case she explicitly pointed to the recognition that there was little fear of an ulterior motive, as both were passionate about finding the best ways to support their students. In Nina’s case, Lindsey shared a foundation in disability studies. They were working together to find ways to help the school grow. Both relationships were mutually beneficial; they supported participants’ opportunities to enact and grow professionally as critically conscious educators.

The social support networks’ problem solving and dialogue often focused in on various aspects of identity maintenance, including working in and throughout the system in a manner that supported continuing identity construction within the classroom and with colleagues. Although this dialogue varied with each school and community context, participants leveraged, buttressed, and mined like-minded individuals’ experiences with their own. Social support included specific dialogue and problem solving in negotiating
the inclusion and presumption of competence of all of their students. Lyra described the communal support of her K-3 counterpart in providing services more inclusively within their school:

[Lyra]: The teacher who does K through three behavior focus [the same type of classroom service that Lyra provides], she and I are very similar. Last year, she and I kind of bonded when we had this huge meeting with the coordinators, and the coaches, and everybody. We were sitting around the tables in my room and our coordinator looks at us and she said, “you need to be doing everything in your classroom. You need to be doing lunch in your classroom. You need to be doing structured recess. You need to be teaching them science.” And afterwards, Chrissy [her K-3 teacher counterpart] and I both looked at each other. We both agreed and then said “we’re not doing that. The school has a gen. ed. teacher to do that stuff. We’re here to give them specially designed instruction behavior support within those classes.” She is an awesome support source.

Like Yvonne and Nina, Lyra depended on Chrissy to act as a confidant within her school. These conversations also frequently served as opportunities for what I term as “member-checking” in order to ensure they were staying true to their identities. Member-checking, frequently discussed in qualitative research as a way to maintain the reliability and validity of data, is used to determine whether a researcher’s interpretations of data are accurate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For my participants, this meant that they relied on and utilized dialogue with like-minded individuals, intentionally and unintentionally, to mediate various aspects of their professional lives. Participants positioned like-minded individuals as trusted and reliable sources of assessment for their own interpretations of
particular matters and concerns that arose within their classrooms, schools, and districts. The use of like-minded individuals was discussed broadly by participants and encompassed a wide range of issues and choices, including pedagogy, curriculum, accountability, overrepresentation, and utilization of paraprofessionals. Chrissy and Lyra’s exchanging of a “look” denoted their mutual understanding of fidelity to inclusion; both believed in the power of inclusive service delivery and in that moment found solace in one another’s values. Without the daily and ongoing support of Chrissy, would Lyra have felt confident (as a new teacher) to stand up to and against the administration’s plan for excluding her students? Even further, might she have altered her own stance on teaching inclusively? Like-minded individuals within schools, like Lyra, Nina, and Yvonne’s colleagues, were critical components to participants’ social support networks. Although the support of cohort and in district/school was similar, participants also took time to explicitly discuss the varied and integral role the like-minded individuals that made up their educational cohort played in their identity maintenance.

Many participants, most often those who were/had been working on their PhDs, positioned the social support networks that were developed at their universities (their cohort) as an aspect of their continuing and ongoing engagement with working in the system while asserting their DSE identities. Erik conveyed hat his cohort’s convictions and enthusiasm about social justice education was a main source of support that kept him challenged and enthusiastic as an educator. The cohort social support network created a natural critical community of practice that participants could rely on, with individuals who also had a DSE foundation. When asked about the types of support she relied on when faced with an issue pertaining to identity maintenance, Anna stated:
I would feel like I would need to go to someone who could truly understand where I was coming from. I would also probably think about reaching out to someone from our program, and I would think about reaching out to my friend Stephanie that I graduated from the program. Recent graduates as well as other cohorts…

When prompted for a specific example, she replied:

When we moved to the Common Core we had some issues with IEPs. I didn’t know how to approach it. It was not going in the direction I was hoping it would go. So I decided to call up Audrey and Carol for advice. I asked them if they had had this happen, what they did, what they had seen done, how they utilized various resources, and just really tried to support each other as we go through the whole believing in DS but working within the system.

Participants leaned on their cohorts’ pedagogical and philosophical convictions to support their work, sometimes even covertly working the system toward their will through their cohorts’ support. Cohort support occurred across and with multiple participants who took part in the study. Erika recalled an instance in which she looked to Anna for support:

[Erika]: I usually go to my cohort, we’re all still in contact with each other. The girl that I was talking to you about, Anna, she is an autism specialist in my district, so her and I get together quite a lot and we talk about …well we try not to do it on email because we know that our emails are looked at. But we’ll get together and we’ll say, “this teacher is not including a student or whatever, can you help me out?” Or the director said this and she’ll be like “okay.” Anna’s in a different position than I am, she has more authority and she can influence things
in other ways. She and I are basically this small disability studies cohort together in our district. We are very like-minded and we are trying to play into our hands—we’re trying to do the same things.

Participants positioned and understood their cohort support network as “fostering of a sense of collective action and activity … and [helped] to sustain their collective efforts to work towards greater inclusivity in schooling” (Broderick et al., 2011, p. 834). Although these types of cohort support groups were still organized and utilized in an informal manner, they played an important role in sustaining participants. When these groups were formalized in some manner (such as a LISTSERV email communication query list), individuals used these organizations to reach out to a social support network that was large, varied, and like-minded to engage in problem solving. Formal LISTSERVs (that were developed by faculty and their universities) played a role in outreach and support to participants. As literature has pointed out, it is the responsibility of teacher educators to teach prospective teachers how to form and establish their own networks and connect them to existing networks that will support their continuing identity work (Montaño & Burnstein, 2006; Ritchie, 2012). Participants’ respective cohorts, along with formal mechanisms for ongoing communication, were significant parts of their social support networks.

Participants’ first level of support were like-minded individuals. This might be because of the proximity and accessibility of these individuals. Relationships with like-minded individuals at their schools and with their cohorts facilitated seamless opportunities to engage in dialogue and problem solving that supported their transgressive work. Although participants relied on cohort support networks heavily, they
discussed the variety of tertiary aspects of their social support networks, including college and university faculty.

**College Faculty as a resource.** Educators discussed many instances in which they directly sought feedback and input from faculty from their respective programs to support the assertion of their DSE identity. In some ways, faculty from their respective disability studies grounded and influenced programs and functioned similarly to the social support that like-minded individuals contributed to maintaining participants’ work within schools. But since interactions with faculty were not everyday occurrences in participants’ lives, faculty assistance was employed less frequently than support from like-minded individuals. Faculty was most often utilized when particular issues or concerns arose that participants wanted specific and targeted support in navigating. In some instances, faculty acted as a member-check by bolstering and reaffirming participants’ underlying belief systems and confidence. Ava recalled an instance during her first year of teaching when she was confronted by a potential fracturing of her identity. The math co-teacher was pushing for a student to be placed in a self-contained math class. At that moment Ava felt she could have easily veered away from an aspect of her underlying belief system. After contacting a faculty member for advice, she felt confident in her own knowledge and underlying convictions for keeping students serviced within general education settings. As she recalled:

[Ava]: I think in the moment I was so overwhelmed by being on my own and I was working with somebody who was ready to retire. It was her last year. I kind of deferred to her in that situation because I don’t know math. I know math but it’s not my comfort zone.
Carrie: It was your first year teaching in a new school. I remember that you told me before you had a hard time in math.

[Ava]: I still do. Like I need a calculator for almost everything. I can’t do anything in my head. I feel really confident at seventh grade math now, I feel like super smart. But if you gave me something higher level, forget it; it would be blank.

They [the content teacher and grade level team] were recommending putting the student in a more restrictive environment. In that situation, I felt like I had no ground to stand on because number 1, I don’t know math so I couldn’t possibly tell you if the student can be successful in it. But then as time went on, and after talking to Helen [the faculty member] I realized that I was going against what I believed. She kind of pushed me to think about those insecurities and my beliefs. It kind of was like giving me a slap in the face. She helped remind me and reassure me that I know what I’m doing. I might not know math but that’s not the point. Then I felt more comfortable to stand my ground and assert that I could support the child in this class. To keep her included.

This instance, although more extreme than others discussed, happened more frequently to teachers in the study who were just beginning their careers and pointed to the continued malleability of teachers’ professional identities in relation to their work within schools. Ava described her experience as helping her to re-confirm the values that underlay her DSE identity. These types of ongoing opportunities to be in contact with and receive support from faculty could be vital to the induction and sustenance of critically conscious educators. Coming into schools as new teachers can be overwhelming and difficult,
especially when colleagues are not on the same page. Faculty from their DSE grounded and influenced programs were positioned as consultants to whom they could reach out. Faculty yielded particular advice about resources that were available and could be utilized within participants’ schools and districts; part of the support included the use of faculty as a part of their social support network through social media apparatuses.

Virtual and online support networks. Participants drew on and from a variety of resources simultaneously to sustain their underlying belief systems. Although they did leverage face-to-face meetings and exchanges as one mechanism of support, their networks of support extended beyond local and more traditional networks of support (email, phone call, etc.). Specifically, educators pulled from a variety of resources in tandem to support their identity maintenance within their respective K-12 classrooms and schools. Participants discussed the continued use of faculty and university program Facebook pages as a resource that they frequently visited, posted on, and utilized in their work as educators. As Nina stated when asked about the types of support she drew on:

I feel like I try to research a lot, always learning more. But that is something that’s really time consuming to find, you kind of have to weed through it [the Facebook feed]. One way I streamlined it was, I went on one of the faculty members Facebook pages and tried to like all of her pages, so that I could be at least getting updated and frequent information. Now, my Facebook is not even a personal thing. It’s a resource for inclusion and disabilities, lots of different ideas and strategies.

As Nina suggested, Facebook provided opportunities for continued interaction with multiple and varied human and virtual resources that were rooted in the pedagogical and
philosophical tenets of their respective programs and DSE. Participants utilized faculty and university program Facebook pages as resources for their social support network in dynamic ways; both taking information posted to the site, as well as building their own Facebook pages based on the followers and liked pages of such faculty and university pages. Many of the participants saw virtual interaction space as an extension of their respective DSE programs; it became one of the critical sites for participants’ ongoing and continuing reflection, growth, and innovation.

In addition to Facebook, participants also pointed to their use of other social media and virtual social support systems. The multitude of virtual social support systems that participants drew on and from was part of their online learning community and included Twitter, podcasts and blogs, along with professional, educational, and research-affiliated Web sites and groups. Most of the online learning communities that participants discussed were not formal professional development communities or classes (that had been set up to meet outsiders’ objectives), but were virtual social support networks that they crafted and assembled as means for their own professional goals. For Ava, “teacher Twitter,” was a way for her to follow a number of education-related Twitter pages. Although not formalized, these “online networks and learning communities provide[d] support for teachers interested in justice issues across geographic borders” … where they were able to both take and “… share ideas and resources when it may not be practical to meet face to face” (Ritchie, 2012, p. 122). Amelia also stated that Twitter was a resource she drew on for her continued identity work in schools:
It’s like a 24/7 PD session and you just get to tune into whatever you like. I follow a bunch of disability stuff … It really helps me to think deeply about disability and to continue to challenge my own assumptions.

The utilization of these resources as a part of their social support network provided participants with a constant source of support that participants could directly interact and interface with. It could also be leveraged as a non-confrontational, non-invasive source for uninterrupted and ongoing support. Participants had the choice to provide input and reciprocal support or responses to individuals also interfacing with these online support systems; they could simply take from and utilize what they chose as relevant, as opposed to engaging in more traditional dialogue and reciprocal interaction. Nonetheless, online sources of support networks provided educators with a steady stream of and easy access to information and advice to pull from to maintain their practice, whether it was emotionally, pedagogically, and/or philosophically. Educators discussed the utilization of these Web-based groups and resources as an aspect that was both part of and augmentation to their social support groups. Although very few studies have discussed the specific use of the Internet and varying social media apparatuses as a social support used by teachers, research in technology suggests that these types of relational networks can be utilized as a substantial social support for individuals seeking guidance and help (Cho, Ro, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2013; Forte, Humphreys, & Park; 2012; Sela, 2013; Risser, 2013). Social support networks also assisted in helping individuals avoid isolation by creating feelings of belonging within larger digital communities (Leung & Lee, 2005; Merchant, 2012).
Learning as a form of support. Finally, individuals positioned their desire to be lifelong learners, reflective practitioners, and shepherds of disability studies as catalysts to refining, expanding, and bolstering their own social support networks. Eric stated that learning was a main mechanism of support:

[Eric]: One way I sustain myself, I mean you have to try to keep things interesting for yourself as a teacher. You have to change things up and grow. I couldn’t do the same thing every year, I would just get bored. That is why I try to integrate lots of different projects. You have to try to keep growing and coming up with new approaches year to year. That is one of the largest ways that I support myself.

Positioning themselves as lifelong learners, who are continuously cultivating their professional practices, was an essential aspect of participants’ identity maintenance. Individuals described how they did not want to become stagnant in their practice. In order to continue to enrich their own knowledge and practice as professionals, participants joined professional organizations, attended conferences, and tapped into the expertise, experiences, and resources that were made available by like-minded individuals, including faculty. Participants’ work at local universities and colleges helped to expand and grow their practice. In a similar manner to Eric, Norman discussed how his work with undergraduate students at a local university supported his growth and identity maintenance and also grew his own social support network.

[Norman]: By continuing to work in the academy as an adjunct, I am able to keep my fingers in there and to keep my brain in that mindset. I feel like by continuing to work with students, especially with students who don’t know the disability studies framework, I am able to support my own identity and theirs. When I go to
other places, spread the word (as it were) and to take it [DSE] to the places where it’s not a part of the culture, I think that getting into those university settings, I think is really meaningful to my own work.

Finding ways to consistently improve and expand on their practice through these opportunities for individual growth, as well as honing in on the various facets of their social support networks was essential to all participants’ identity maintenance. Educators in the study aspired to engage in continual growth and reflection, and social support networks facilitated their ability to maintain a semblance of fidelity to their underlying social justice orientated belief systems.

Participants concurrently drew from a variety of in-person and virtual social support networks. These social support networks acted as well-defined and essential facets to their individual identity work within their K-12 schools—whether they were disseminating an issue that might have serious consequences on a student’s life or if they were reminiscing and/or finding joy in their students’ stories. The core of their social support network was woven with individuals who were like-minded, but each interactional facet of their networks helped participants share in a common commitment of remaining true to themselves and their identities, while continuing to critically challenge themselves (Broderick et al., 2011). Participants who were part of and had a consistent critical community of practice benefitted tremendously from the opportunity to remain true to “a vision of the possible and [that] connected [them] to an alternate, extended professional community” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 58). At times, participants’ social support network was extended to administrators who were like-
minded, who positioned and perceived participants as allies in working toward change within their respective schools and districts.

**The role of administrators within/outside of the social support network**

Administrative support was a crucial factor that significantly impacted participants’ experiences enacting and asserting their identities within their individual school contexts. Support from leadership was a critical element to participants’ emotional and professional well-being, along with their individual beliefs about longevity and retention within the profession. As literature has stated, school leadership continues to play an integral role in teachers’ lives, including their daily work life, job satisfaction, and overall retention within the profession (Billingsley, 2006; Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004; Wong, 2004). For participants in this study, experiences with school leadership could be categorized in two primary ways—meaningful supporters and superficial inconsistent supporters. Some were publically and genuinely provided with valuable and meaningful support by their administration; in these instances, to participants, support included the development of reciprocally beneficial collaborative and collegial relationships. Administrators who were genuine were simultaneously open, honest, and encouraging toward participants about both the opportunities and limitations for change within their schooling contexts. In these situations, participants felt more positive about their ability to enact and work toward change within their individual school contexts that was aligned with their DSE identities. Norman clearly stated how he had constructed the importance of administrative support in his ongoing work:

Yeah sometimes it does get a little discouraging when you think you’ve made progress and then all of a sudden you haven’t, or you finally gotten an
administrator at a school site to understand your perspective and to start to
implement and the administrator leaves or is transferred to somewhere else to
another district. It’s like “oh I got to do this all over again.”

On the other hand, participants who were more superficially and inconsistently supported
from administration were more apt to discuss administrators as barriers to their overall
professional beliefs and goals. The lack of camaraderie from administration, even at the
most minute level, left many participants feeling more constrained and distraught by their
own overarching school systems and broader systems of schooling. Nevertheless, those
who perceived their relationships with administrators as beneficial were deeply impacted
and provided with more chances to enact their identities through administrators’
underlying support.

Support(ed) from leadership. “Strong caring leadership” that is open and well-
organized continues to be a major source of support for teachers in their professional
lives (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 412). Teachers who were visibly and consistently
supported by their administrators were more likely to feel personally invested in their
work within public schools, which provided a space for the cultivation and continuing
development of their identities. Within these experiences, educators were also more
likely to position their administrators as part of their social support network, as
individuals whom they could seek out as reciprocal members of their critical
communities of practice. As Anna stated:

I really truly believe that the administrators that I work with have the students’
best interest at heart. I know that they probably are not familiar and understand
DS but they are very interested in finding ways to best support our students. Our
special ed. director she’s very interested in problem solving. If you come to her with a problem and you provide some approaches to make it work, I she’s very open to entertaining your ideas. Whether it be DS or not. For me too, I understand too that it might just be me she’s treating this way. I don’t know if other people think of her like that. But she’s always been open to what I’ve had to say and she’s always been willing to sit and listen to me. When I run into issues, I will email her and make an appointment and she is always willing to sit in her office and talk with me about it and we find a way to work it out.

Carrie: That’s great because so many people don’t have that type of support.

[Anna]: I know, I know, and I feel really, really fortunate to have someone that’s so open to listening. Now granted there may come a time where she’s going to say no, you know I don’t agree with that or I don’t think that that’s going to work, and you need to do it this way. But, I haven’t run into that yet. But the best thing I could say at that point … and I feel like I’m at a point in my career where I don’t mind saying in those circumstances that I have to respectfully disagree with you. I will do what you’re asking me to do, however, I’m going to let you know that I don’t know that this is going to work.

Luckily I am fortunate enough to have that opportunity. I don’t feel stifled by anyone. I know that some people aren’t as fortunate as I am and they are much more limited in what they feel they can do and say.

As Anna suggested, these relationships offered participants opportunities to engage in active problem solving that resulted in a larger impact on their school communities. Administrators who were publically supportive also helped position participants as
resources within their buildings and districts. In such cases, participants were provided with opportunities to lead professional development and expose other individuals within their communities to their underlying DSE and inclusive belief systems. Administrators and school leaders even looked to these individuals themselves as trusted members of their own critical communities of practice. Some participants were even sought out by their administrators for more specific discussion on how to make their schools and communities more inclusive and supportive of all students. Nina recalled how the relationship with her administration impacted opportunities to live out her beliefs, as well as one of the reasons she chose to work in her particular school and district:

[Nina]: My first year teaching was a little intense—I had 48 kids on my caseload and was doing a lot of pullout, which I didn’t really agree with. I decided to talk to my principal about that [self-contained service]. I told her that “this [self-contained service] is not something that I support, but I would do it for the first year but then we could start talking about how we could change services and try to create a more inclusive school.” She was really open to it. She said “Yeah, teach me, what have you got?” And I mean she read a lot of the articles that I got in grad school from my professors….  

Carrie: She was willing to talk to you about it?

[Nina]: Yeah, so when I had interviewed for this job I was still in Iowa. I had a couple of other job offers, like four or five, but I turned them down because the roles for the special ed teachers were not what I believed in. The difference with this job was that the principal … in our first conversation she said you know I don’t know much, but I’m willing to learn, we can kind of learn together and it
was her first year as a principal. I have gotten to make a lot of changes with her. She asked me a lot of questions. For example she would say IEP student and SPED kid and I was trying to teach her about like person first language and she was so open to it. I started giving her articles. I sent her some links to videos that I watched in class. She read a bunch of books that I gave her. The principal and I met twice a month and just talked about the books. I got to speak freely as a first year teacher and communicate all of my beliefs and why I feel the way I do. I mean she learned so much last year, and now we’re trying to put it into practice. We’re not there yet and it probably won’t be anything that’s happening too soon but we’re trying to take baby steps as a whole school. We’re trying to improve our language. I’ve done a bunch of presentations on person first language because there’s this culture here where kids are called behavior kids and IEP kids and SPED kids.

Although, Nina later remarked how these conversations and professional development had been noticeably absent during the current year, following the implementation of a new assessment system that was aligned with the Common Core. As Nina recalled:

I haven’t done any PD except one at the beginning of the year … Last year we [the principal and her] met all the time to talk about inclusion, but this year we haven’t really sat down. We used to sit down every other week and talk about articles we were reading. But we haven’t had those structured conversations in a while.

Nina had noticed that the momentum and consistency of these “planning” meetings had slowed down, along with the progress on their whole school inclusive initiatives.
Although she did feel that they would begin to meet and plan again, much of their work was halted. She attributed the halt in collaboration with her administrator to the onslaught of demands that had begun since the school had adopted a new Common Core reading program.

At the same time, because of her sustained relationship with her principal, she continued to feel comfortable approaching her with issues, some of which were discussed in the previous two data chapters. Collegial relationships, like the one between Nina and her administrator, were an important factor. Positive and meaningful relationships with school administration continue to play an even more powerful role in the facilitation of inclusive schools as shared partners (Hehir & Katzman, 2011; Theoharis, 2007). As school leadership acts to facilitate the schools’ alignment between individual responsibility, collective expectations, and internal accountability in order to contribute to their success with inclusion (Hehir & Katzman, 2011). Nina’s dynamic, mutually supportive, and ongoing relationship with her administrator provided her with an opportunity to put her beliefs into practice, and therefore the ability to stay true to her DSE identity.

Similarly, Norman spoke of the institutional opportunities he was provided because of the relationship and support his administrators offered to him. Since his administrators trusted in his professional beliefs and values, he was afforded the space to instill practices that helped include his students. He described what happened when he approached administration about the need for his students to be included within the school community:
I went to the administrator and told him that we were going to include our students. I stated which specific classes I wanted them in and he said, “okay.” So we did it. I didn’t really get a ton of push back on that. I have the law behind me, if need be, I was willing to play that card. But when I told him the benefits of inclusion, for both general education and special education students, he just said “Okay. Let’s do this.”

In Norman’s case, his relationship with school leadership afforded him the means to openly and sincerely express his professional beliefs, something not made available to all participants. The exchange with his administration even resulted in more of his students being included within general education. Further, his administration was responsive to his request. He did not have to engage in a more oppositional use of tactics because of the level of support administrators afforded him. When administrators positioned themselves as a source of support, participants’ ongoing identity work was bolstered. These instances also helped secure and preserve participants’ personal and ongoing beliefs in the possibility of school-level change.

**Inauthentic and absent support from leadership.** On the contrary, individuals in the study who were not provided consistently with ongoing and public support reported feeling that their continuing work was not appreciated, noticed, or valued. I purposefully utilize the word public to describe administrative support, because in some instances administrators had stated that they wanted more inclusive service delivery within their buildings and districts to participants (one was even hired to facilitate this initiative), but did not provide support publically. For example, when administrators were placed in situations that required them to demonstrate allegiance to inclusion and/or
transforming their current school system with multiple school stakeholders at official, team, grade level, and/or school meeting, therefore publically supporting the individual or initiative, they did not. Ava had been frustrated by the inauthentic support her administrator offered to her, since she was hired to help move toward more inclusive service. Her administrator’s public support remained noticeably absent and was sometimes in direct contradiction to what was communicated to her when they had spoken in private. Ava discussed how his inconsistent public support led her to leave the district and building.

[Ava]: It was just little things that kept happening. They kept building and building. I realized I would never get support from the principal. Only behind closed doors he would say you’re doing a great job, you’re absolutely right, people need to respect you and listen to you, and you’re on the right track. But then when the opportunity would come to actually back me up and he would chicken out and be quiet.

Carrie: That’s interesting because you said he hired you because he wanted you to mix things up, but then in public he wasn’t acknowledging that at all.

[Ava]: Yeah and he’s kind of notorious for that I found out I guess just by experiencing that and other teachers.

In these instances, the support from administration was deemed by participants as “paying lip service,” or as insincere support to these school initiatives. Ava was hired to move the school toward more inclusive models, yet her administrator provided little to no public support for these initiatives. Participants’ experiences intensified and became
aggravated in instances where they felt as though they received little to no support, even if only privately, from administration.

Participants who felt unsupported by administration became increasingly disconcerted and hopeless about their location within the system(s) of schooling. Educators who discussed facing these types of situations described experiencing a professional dismissal of their overarching ideas, beliefs, and values. Participants felt as though their identities were often positioned as insignificant and/or as not contributing to overall systems of schooling. The majority of participants did not describe substantial differences in their experiences and perceptions of private support from administration based on their gender, ability, race, and/or cultural background. Although there was a noticeable difference in the manner in which Norman spoke about both private and public support. Norman’s positioning and identity as a white and significantly older male facilitated less opposition when asserting aspects of his identity with administrators. Perceptions of inexperience and misunderstanding of the system of public and special education also seemed to impact notions of private support.

Some participants were deemed by administrators to not have “earned their stripes” or were characterized as simply being unrealistic about schooling, implying that they didn’t comprehend what it meant to work and be in system. In these instances, educators’ concerns were not addressed and they were further demoralized. Some participants—Erika, Angela, and Anna—were even transferred by their administrators to other schools within the same districts (this happened to Erika at multiple points in her career), because of their push for more inclusive service supports. As Erika recalled when asked about the particular phenomenon of being moved or transferred after butting heads
or not complying with an administrator around inclusion and/or disability, “Oh this has happened tons of times … I’ve moved nine times in twelve years … And it’s always been because of an administrator.” Others in similar situations were unaccompanied and unsubstantiated in their vision for inclusion by administration, indicating the consequences of an absence of shared understanding or legitimation of their belief systems. Molly described her administrator’s lack of responsiveness or authentic acknowledgement of her belief systems by comparing her current non-relationship and non-supportive administration in her efforts to include her students to her past positive experiences with administrators:

I could sum up the difference between where I was before and where I am now. I would say there’s a definite difference in leadership. In my third year I’ve had three different special ed. administrators in three years. My first year there, I was bringing in our professional learning communities; I asked, “how can we could get our kids out more? You know they were doing focused reading in my room, so they could do that in general education.” Or I’d bring up and ask them to share their schedules to include my kids and ask if I could send in an associate with them to work in their classroom. Different things like that. And my first administrator just couldn’t understand why that would be important. He just said, “well they’re going to be working on it here or out there, what does it matter where they’re working on that?”

My administrator last year she’s actually the migrant coordinator of our district, so I think she got it a little bit more, but she kind of got thrown into the special ed. director’s position and didn’t really know she was going to be. So she didn’t
really have a ton of background and she didn’t really get it. She did work hard to get us some materials and curriculum and things. But it was just the beginning and she was replaced or moved or something.

I did have a conversation with my new administrator this year. I went to him about a month after school had started and I just said, “I’ve been having a lot of frustration and I think that my frustrations are coming from the fact that I don’t feel like what I’m doing is true to what I feel like these kids should or could be doing. I am not sure how to get them out in the classroom more. I don’t know how to make that happen, and I don’t know how to bridge that gap.” He is a former guidance counselor, so he was very understanding and he listened well, but again, he doesn’t have any background in special education. I just don’t know if he gets it completely. He said, “you know as much as we can, we get them out there. And our building does a better job than other buildings in the district. You know they participate in lunch, recess, specials, and maybe if I can get them up there for science lessons sometimes. Other than that, it’s they’re your kids, you take care of them. You’re a classroom teacher, you’re not a support service.” It’s a different mindset than what I think special education should be a support rather than a place.

Molly’s experience with her last three administrators demonstrates the lack of knowledge that many administrators have about special education and inclusion. Her first administrator couldn’t even conceptualize why having her students work on the curriculum within the general education classroom with general education peers could be of any importance. Her second administrator, who was more helpful and had begun to
support Molly’s efforts in some way (although still lacked special education knowledge),
was moved after only one year. Finally her current administrator positioned Molly’s
beliefs as inconsequential, since the school was already giving her students time “as
much as they can, out there” and “doing a better job than other buildings in their district.”
To Molly, all three of her administrators had a substantial lack of knowledge about
special education. It seemed as though all three of her administrators were, as Molly put
it, “thrown into it [special education administration].” Molly, like other participants,
perceived the role of administration as vital to her continuing identity work, and she had
very little if no support from her administrators in her vision or beliefs. The lack of
administrator support or understanding of special education and inclusion and mirrors
one of Hehir and Katzman’s (2011) overarching beliefs about building effective inclusive
schools; when the responsibility to educate students with disabilities lies solely with
special education teachers, meaningful opportunities to alter and transform schools are
not available or viable. The dismissal of Molly’s beliefs may be attributed to the lack of
consistent training and education that administrators have around disability and special
education (Pazey & Cole, 2012). As she suggested, none of the administrators in her
current school had experience with special education. As research suggests, even
administrators who are working toward social justice often do not place the needs or
inclusion of students with disabilities to be included as a central issue of justice (Brown
2004; Marshall, 2004; Pazey & Cole, 2012). Since many of participants’ administrators
lacked a vision for inclusion from my participants’ perspective, the responsibility for
students with disabilities was left on their shoulders. Without more authentic levels of
support, participants felt as though their own professional goals and values were being
pushed aside as unimportant to the school and its overall culture. Many of these experiences left educators feeling even more isolated and alienated from their schools. Notions of public support were further exacerbated by many of their administrators’ responses to and public discussion of the standards and accountability-based reform, as well as other initiatives.

Scholars in DSE have remained critical of many of the aspects that have become constructed and stabilized as part of the reform movement, that have led to increased segregation and isolation of individuals with disabilities within public education (including standardized assessments, exclusion, teacher accountability, etc.); administrators’ public responses to these continued demands weighed heavily on participants’ conceptions of mutuality and collegiality. Perceptions of support were significant to participants’ feelings of either isolation or belonging within schools.

Participants who felt unsupported became increasingly frustrated by their administrations’ disconnect and blatant ignoring of the stressors associated with these demands. Amelia mentioned how she had become unsettled by her administration’s public displays of allegiance and erroneous authenticity to state mandated demands:

[Amelia]: I don’t know where to go anymore. I don’t know what to do with my life. Everybody is kind of in that space. Like what do we do?

Carrie: Does it help, that camaraderie? The opportunity to talk to other teachers who are feeling the same way?

[Amelia]: To some extent. But the bigger piece is that there feels like there is a lack of solutions. It feels like nobody knows what to do … I sometimes think I
would feel differently if the administration was actively outspoken and supportive of its teachers. But they aren’t.

Carrie: They aren’t recognizing the issues?

[Amelia]: No, no. I do think there are certain places where this misery is being handled better because there is a structure in place, and there is more camaraderie, trust in the building, and administration itself. But that doesn’t happen in my building. [If they would] just be transparent about it and try to openly talk about our values and what we think makes a great education, while still checking those boxes. Really talking about how we can support each other in this insane time. If there was any kind of that going on I think it would feel quite different.

Administrators, like Amelia’s, who did not exhibit any shred of camaraderie with their school staff around the heightened and sometimes unattainable demands of reform that faced public educators, but instead fed into or acted as cheerleaders to these reforms, obstructed participants’ fidelity to these school systems. Amelia continued to feel marginalized by the systematic limitations and expectations that had been placed on her role as a teacher. She felt that even just recognition of those feelings as legitimate might have helped maintain her own commitments to her work as public school teacher. But her administrator’s own alignment and espousal to state initiatives and their continuing non-recognition of stressors that had been placed on teachers made it difficult for educators like Amelia to feel validated in their beliefs and values about teaching and education.

On the other hand, individuals whose administrators openly and honestly discussed these demands as critical members of their school community felt increasingly supported by their administrators as colleagues who recognized of the pressures that
schools and teachers face. Nina recalled a conversation she had with her principal that exemplified this:

The other day I was talking to my principal and we were joking, I had said, “I want to go to work at Starbucks. I can’t even stress how much stress I’m under right now.” She said, “I know,” she said “what can we do?” I said, “I don’t know.” She said, “Oh let’s just open our own school,” and then we started talking about all the supports we’d have for kids in our imaginary school. She said, “what if these kids had a behavior problem, then we just bring them all together and we’d just talk about things. We wouldn’t be constrained by the system, having to teach the content a certain amount of minutes, and all these things Common Core. I mean they’re still going to learn and be taught but discussed how it would be different.” It was just kind of fun and it was nice to know that other people, even her, feel like that.

Administrators’ open and public expression about the impact that the demands and stressors of accountability and standardization had on their daily work significantly impacted educators’ sense of collegiality and provided participants with vital opportunities for camaraderie. Both stakeholders felt constrained by the demands. Even though the administrator would most likely not go through with these ambitions, developing a shared sense of place and positionality within the current demands of schooling helped support Nina’s sense of self. Both could commiserate about their frustrations with policies and practices that were contradictory to their underlying belief systems. By simply telling “her truth,” Nina’s administrator bolstered Nina’s own perceptions of belonging within larger systems. Nina was not alone or isolated by her
feelings of bewilderment with reform efforts and practices. Belonging (or not) within the larger school community became a considerable aspect of participants’ experiences and mediated the perceived validity of their identities within their respective schools. It also left them with feelings of uncertainty around their own professional affiliations to DSE as public educators.

Participants’ experiences, both those supported by administrators and otherwise, partnered with their continued dismissal and distrust of a transformation of the system toward their will, positioned many as having little hope for change (at their schools and in the system). To participants, owning a DSE identity as a public school teacher became increasingly more difficult, especially for those who felt unsupported. Even Nina, whose principal was open and willing to collaborate, began to discuss how the recent stressors of the implementation of the Common Core had had on her opportunity to continue to work toward transforming her school:

[Nina]: There is so much pressure. I don’t know … it’s making me rethink. It’s sad, I’ve been so busy this year helping the teachers and trying to figure out this assessment that we haven’t really moved forward in those conversations that we had last year. The kids that need support, they’re really not getting it. I mean nothing has changed.

I swim in the mornings with my principal and I just said, "We can start the PD again, you know any time. We can start going twice a month again because we need to start talking about what needs to be happening and how we’re including all kids.‘ But it doesn’t feel there’s any time now to ever to just sit and actually collaborate…
Carrie: It seems like all these demands with the assessment and Common Core are halting your guy’s efforts to make the school more inclusive.

[Nina]: It is. I think people are under the impression that we are including the kids because they’re in the general ed, but we are not. And there hasn’t been time to address that. I don’t know if it [professional development] will happen this year because there’s only one of me and the other learning specialist...

Nina’s hesitations about opportunities for transformation were apparent throughout the exchange. Would she and the other learning specialist have time? Would they continue the PD? Nina looked to her administrator to confirm and support these necessary details, but would she? Leadership played a role in how participants traversed their individual schooling contexts. Although, when present, administrative support played an integral role in their work, the saliency of participants’ DSE identities were consistently challenged and made more complicated. The internal struggle to remain true to themselves in systems that were not supportive of their underlying values and beliefs led many to reconsider the viability of their own tenancy as public school teachers. These experiences left many doubting and reconsidering their capacity to make any real or sustained change; essentially they expressed losing hope of maintaining fidelity to their identities within their everyday work.

**Leaving the profession: “I can’t decide if it’s worth it…”**

Every year thousands of teachers leave the field of education (Montrose, Smith, Tyler, Mortorff-Robb, & Watson, 2011). This fact has been thoroughly documented in research and continues to be a tangible obstacle faced in the field of education (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley, 2005; Montrose et al., 2011). Although in general,
research has highlighted that the majority of teachers who choose to leave the profession do so within their first five years, the heightened demands of the standards and accountability movement have been correlated with a noticeable spike in the number of both rookie and veteran teachers who have selected to leave the profession (Ravich, 2013; Sapon-Shevin & Schneidewind, 2012). The choice to leave the profession of teaching has become even more salient for teachers who choose to resist, question, and speak out against the utilization of state-authorized and district-adopted programs (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). In many instances, individuals who choose to challenge these policies are perceived by their administration and colleagues as unprofessional, leading to a plethora of social, emotional, and physical exclusions from the school and its overarching community (Montaño & Burnstein, 2006). Even if they are not perceived in this manner, their relationship to systems and policies that go against their own professional beliefs may result in the same feelings of isolation, frustration, and hopelessness (Gibby-Wachter, 2000; Parkinson, 2008). More explicitly stated:

Having little say in the terms, processes, and outcomes of their work may undermine the ability of teachers to feel that they are doing worthwhile work—the very reason many of them came into the occupation in the first place—and may end up contributing to the turnover of teachers (Ingersoll, 2003, pp. 236-237).

My participants’ experiences within their individual schooling contexts parallel these trends. Feelings of discontent and disconnect within their current positions led the majority of my participants to question their continuing role in enacting change and practicing their identities within today’s public schools.
Participants attributed many of these feelings to the lack of professional support they were experiencing. Although I recognize that the retention of teachers who are socially just is far more complicated and cannot simply be boiled down to the network of social support that educators, and specifically participants, have, it did play a significant role in how participants discussed their own endurance within the field. Feelings of seclusion from the overall school community exacerbated participants’ understanding of their place in their particular school systems and in schooling more broadly. Individuals who felt as though they were going at it alone, were alienated within their current role, and/or had limited, infrequent, and irregular modes of social support were more apt to express their desire to leave the system. For example, the lack of support at the institutional level to simply recognize an alternative vision of the school left Molly feeling as though she had no viable solutions to professionally move forward:

On a personal level I honestly … my husband and I talk all the time. I just don’t know how much longer I can do this job especially in the school that I’m in. If I had stayed in the school that I was part of before, I could have probably done it for a long time but where I’m at now I just know. I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing. That’s very disheartening every day to go to work and to know it could be better and you can’t make it any better. And you try and you get a little ways but then you take three steps back when they decide to have them on your solely on your roster, instead of the gen ed. teacher’s. It’s even the simple things like when student meals get printed off, they don’t get printed off to the gen ed. teacher, they get printed off to me. They could have a mailbox in the classroom. They could have a desk in the classroom…
Similarly, Angela had begun to lose hope in her ability to assert her own agency and resist within the system, including her efforts to make her institution more aligned with her identity. She had recently been transferred to another school after developing a presentation and plan for making the school more inclusive to district administrators. She had begun to consider leaving:

I’ll be honest with you. I always used to say that I’d never quit teaching as a public school educator. But I was so devastated when we were all set to go to this … I mean our school was going to be an inclusion school at my district and when that got shot down. I came home and I told my husband I think I’m getting old enough (after over thirty years), I don’t think I have the fight left in me anymore. But I hope by teaching at the university level I’ll be able to inspire younger teachers going in because it’s been such a fight, fight, fight, fight all thirty years of my teaching career.

Molly and Angela’s dedication to their underlying ideology and the stability of the system(s) of exclusion within their schools and districts made them question their place within it. As Achinstein & Ogawa (2006) found, “individual resistance is not enough to sustain the resistance or the individual” (p. 58). Individuals who are resisting need critical communities of practice that support and enhance their identity work. When faced with limited opportunities to enact their identities in meaningful ways that moved their schools forward in some manner, no matter the reason, participants began to lose a sense of their own purpose within the larger systems.

Restraints of the overarching systems of special education and public schooling became a consistent reference to the threat participants felt to their identity work. To
participants, the system was a major factor in the power they had (or didn’t have) to enact their identities. Many felt that the systems of special and public education stifled opportunities for, and took away from, why they chose to become teachers. All of the teachers in the study discussed their desires to make a difference in their students’ lives; that was the reason they decided to pursue teaching: to make a difference. But the system itself made it difficult, especially with the heightened pressure that has become a hallmark of today’s schools. Eric discussed his frustrations about his continuing role within the system, which became further delineated after he had come to know disability and special education from a DSE lens:

[Eric]: If anything I think that disability studies has made me think more about my place within the system. And I guess the tension that I feel is that one mindset is to just look at the changes you can make in the system. Another way of looking at it is to understand that my presence in the system is inclusively sustaining that system. There’s no way around the system.

Carrie: That’s the difficult part; we still have the system and have to have people within the system who are working, even if they are working the system in these sneaky ways to make it work for the kids.

[Eric]: I agree with that, but that’s just a tension that you…

Carrie: I know. I have the same tension.

[Eric]: It’s starting to boil. The older I get, the harder it’s becoming to do that covert work I guess.

Carrie: It’s tough work.
[Eric]: It’s not so much difficulty anymore. I think it’s the idea of being silent. That’s what is becoming harder for me. For me, right now, I will always be a teacher in some capacity. I will always be in the field of education, but I don’t know if I can be silent on things anymore. It might be time to pass the baton to someone else to do the work within.

As Eric highlighted, his own teaching and covert work was simultaneously attempting to disrupt the system and perpetuating the tensions to which he had become more keenly attuned. Although he stated that he could not remain silent about these tensions any more, he didn’t place speaking out against these tensions as a viable option. His work as a public school teacher became a non-option for his own identity maintenance. His recognition of his own limitations in the system made it difficult for him to remain within it. The continued and ongoing tensions that educators perceived were placed on them through taking up and enacting their belief systems made it difficult to remain a “cog” in the system. Would they be able to make any real difference within this system? Had they made any headway that pushed their school and district toward inclusion and DSE?

These experiences of identity restriction were magnified by participants’ feelings of the impositions that the accountability and standardization had placed on their individual schooling contexts.

Feelings of misalignment with their districts’ missions for efficiency, performance, and normalization were particularly evident for Amelia, who felt as though her work with students had been made to seem less valuable and meaningful to her through the demands and priorities of reform:
[Amelia]: It’s devastating and honestly I do not see any hope. I’m usually a really hopeful, optimistic person but I don’t see it.

Carrie: That’s sad to me that you don’t see any hope. I’m telling you there’s not that many people out there like you, but there are people out there like you who care about kids, who are working hard, and trying to figure out ways to work within the system to advocate for kids and agitate.

[Amelia]: It takes a real toll. I mean it is one thing to do that when you’re 20 or 22. But it’s another thing to do that when you have kids and a family of your own. You know or like me, where I made the choice of doing that and it literally made me disabled. It’s becomes this choice. Justice for me has always been a really major trigger. It is a huge part of my identity. I was somebody who was an advocate and an activist. But, I’ve just kind of had to realize this hard thing, which is that I can’t be that any more…

She came back to how she had attempted to protect herself later in the interview:

You know I feel like to survive you almost have to turn it into a job, as opposed to a career or a calling or a passion. You have to do what thousands of people do every day; you just kind of suck it up and go to work. But the thing is when you do that with teaching there’s a real cost on so many levels. I mean it’s an identity cost in terms of who we are. I think it’s a … well there’s a financial cost in the sense that I would never have chosen teaching to be the job just to pay for things. Right?

Amelia felt increasingly frustrated and hopeless as the demands and conditions that had become inherent to accountability and standardization left her unable to enact
her own professional principles. She felt that a once salient aspect of her identity, seeking justice was not a sustainable feature within her current school environment and in her own personal life. The space for sustained activism and advocacy seemed to be dwindling, and that upset her. Who could she be if she were not enacting her identity as teacher? To protect herself, she had attempted to position teaching as only a “job,” but continued to feel dissatisfied. As exemplified by Amelia’s experience, if “teachers [begin to] derive absolutely no satisfaction from their work, they may lose the ability to hear themselves and become, bitter, cynical, or indifferent” to their underlying belief systems and purpose (Estola, Erkkila, & Syrjanen, 2010, p. 252).

Further, the environment that had been constructed at her school as a result of the reform movement had exacerbated and manifested in heightened physical pain associated with her disability label. She literally stated that trying to work within the schooling environment had literally “made me disabled.” Throughout her career, Amelia had always identified as an individual with a disability and had been recognized as an asset as a public school teacher to the State of New York (she was named Teacher of the Year the year prior). Nevertheless, the increased, unwavering, and sometimes unattainable demands of the roll out and implementation of many of the aspects of the standards and accountability based reform movement had constructed a new schooling environment that was based on competition and performance that made it nearly impossible for her to exist within it. It had even triggered a substantially intense re-emergence and episode associated with her chronic illness that placed her on medical leave. The social environment that was created disabled her. In a similar manner in which we think about the social model, the standards and accountability culture had created an environment
that limited opportunities for Amelia. The continued and increasing loss of personal
autonomy and choice that had been developed as a result of the reform movement,
partnered with a lack of authentic support, made it difficult for participants, like Amelia,
to realize a sustained space for their multiple identities within today’s public schools.
Teaching continues to be emotional work. The lack of colleagues and individuals who
were personally driven to work toward change, outside of the logic of student and parent
blaming, made it even more difficult for participants to perceive a culture that focused on
student success as central to the purposes of school. Although all of the teachers felt and
expressed the mechanisms of the system as limiting to their DSE identities, newer or
more rookie teachers also expressed these feelings in relation to their own
misinterpretation(s) and transition(s) into their role as teachers.

For newer teachers, the shift from students in teacher education programs to full-
time teachers was even more challenging to their continued identity maintenance. In
itself, the multiple realities of teaching (lesson planning, communicating with parents,
and setting up a classroom) are overwhelming to new, particularly first year, teachers
(Watson, 2006). Even more, negotiating and recognizing how your underlying belief
systems correspond within your new schools and districts’ norms can be jarring and
discordant (Beijaard et al., 2004; Young, 2011a). The disjuncture between university
praxis and school praxis, especially for individuals who have been taught that the system
of public and special education is flawed, made these experiences more difficult for
participants. Lyra recalled an incident when she discussed this fact with her
administrator:
Last year I was really burnt out and crying every day. I wanted to leave teaching. I told my principal that I hated my job. I said, “I don’t know if I can say this to you but hate my job.” And she said, “I would too, you have really hard kids.”

Lyra’s principal’s response was not helpful or valuable to Lyra’s continuing work as a public school teacher. It offered little to no support in relinquishing her feelings of frustration and isolation. Being a new, particularly a first year, teacher is hard work. The accumulation of these experiences, coupled with their desire to disrupt and transform these systems, made the experiences for participants who were within their first few years of teaching even more jostling. Participants felt overwhelmed by the multiple and complicated demands that were placed in front of them and were disheartened by what they had come to understand as the status quo of schooling.

To Nina, the contradictory and competing demands that had come to characterize teaching in 21st century schools made her question if teaching and the tertiary work associated with it was “worth it.” Would she be able to make a difference in these students’ lives or would she contribute to maintaining the system? As she explained:

I worked all these years in college, I got my masters, all that is great. That made me really passionate about certain things but I realized what teaching actually means. It’s not necessarily about the kids, I mean that’s all I want to do is work with the kids … but there are so many other things. I can’t decide if it’s worth it…

Nina had imagined that teaching would center on the students, but had come to experience something different. It was not just about the students; it was paperwork, policy, and the politics of coming up against individuals and systems that did not share their beliefs about schooling. Rookie teachers also expressed fears that they would lose
allegiance to their underlying belief systems as they became more and more acclimated
and assimilated into their schools. Ava described how she was nervous that she “might
get soft … lose her edge … stop evolving … get stuck in her ways….”. These fears of
incongruence with their underlying belief systems, along with feelings of discontent,
became translated into apprehensions about their longevity within the profession of
teaching.

The recurrent conversation between myself and the majority of participants about
leaving the profession left me, as a self-proclaimed hopeful researcher, feeling
increasingly more disheartened about the future of teaching toward social justice and
DSE work. Here were people who were both resisting and developing alternative
frameworks to the structures and mechanisms of schooling, stating again and again that
they were unable to persist. Even with a large and connected social support network,
many still expressed dissatisfaction and disillusionment with their role as agents of
change within K-12 schools. Resisting overarching systems of power is hard work that is
full of turmoil and fluctuations of belief systems. Participants experienced this challenge
daily; it left them feeling increasingly alienated by their individual school contexts and
the system as a whole. Being situated within systems that diminished their professional
autonomy left many feeling hopeless. To these participants, the assumptions that had
come to underlie reform were becoming more and more commonsense and routine to
their daily lives. Could this be the environment that they would continue their careers in?
Would they continue to be pressured to teach in certain ways to certain knowledges? My
participants’ perceptions of the expanded limitations to and consequences of enacting
their identities within public school led many to question their own location and maintenance of the system(s) of public and special education.

**Finding a new path for resistance and identity work.** The struggle to maintain a sense of self positioned the majority of participants to explore alternative paths and look outside of their roles as public school classroom teachers to meet their own professional goals. Educators had aspirations to, and beliefs in, widening the scope of transformation that they could be part of in order to stay true to their DSE identities. Although participants were motivated to leave the field because of the daily frustrations and setbacks that they faced in relation to the misalignment of their DSE identities with their individual schooling contexts and the overall aspects of public and special education, they positioned leaving the classroom as a viable option to enact change at a wider scale. Participants in the study believed that by leaving the classroom they would be able to both help expose individuals to their own critically conscious belief systems and bring about school and district level policies and practices that were more aligned with it. They forecasted that their own work both outside of the system and as leaders would provide them with more relative power within the system. Anna and Norman had already taken the leap out of the classroom and into administration. Both had hopes to expand the network of like-minded individuals who espoused this identity within their schools and districts. The majority of the individuals who had considered leaving classroom teaching and had not left discussed one of two career paths: they would either become teacher educators or teacher leaders.

Many of those who had plans to leave the classroom and pursue faculty positions at a college or university had already or were in the process of finishing their PhDs. Since
many planned to seek out positions at local universities and colleges, they felt their roles as teacher educators would help to facilitate wider nets of DSE within surrounding schools and districts. Essentially, participants wanted to flood their communities with more rookie educators and professionals who were like-minded individuals who could support each other in continuing social justice and DSE-oriented work within schools. At the same time, individuals also believed they could have a more substantive role within their districts once they had credibility afforded by the letters “PhD.” Many thought they could offer consulting services to schools, districts, and families to attempt to provide services in a more inclusive manner that recognized a DSE perspective.

Those who wanted to remain at the school or district level believed that the most efficient and effective way for them to make more widespread change was to take on a teacher leader role within their district. Essentially, they desired to provide and bolster practicing teachers’ toolkits through ongoing in-class support and consultation. Participants’ aspirations to persist in some manner in this work, even outside of the classroom, pointed to their belief in that their work as individuals could support larger changes in schools, districts, and systems. For all participants, some hope in altering the system (in some way) remained. Through these imagined possibilities, participants attempted to make aspects of their identity feasible through the malleability of their role within it. To them, they could make a difference; just not in their current role. Expanding opportunities for change were viable in roles that held more power. Although a majority of the participants discussed their plans for leaving the classroom permanently to pursue what they believed would result in a potential widening of their scope of influence, and
essentially of DSE as a field, there were a few participants who believed that they would remain in the classroom for some time.

Even with the increased pressures that had stalled many of their attempts to meaningfully enact their belief systems within their classrooms and schools, a limited number of participants remained hopeful for their own sustainment and retention within the field of teaching for some time. For those participants, their own enthusiasm for teaching remained centered on their continuing desire to help and support their students.

Carrie: Do you see yourself staying in this career for some time?

[Ava]: Yes. I just hope I don’t lose that drive or spark … I think it’s going to be easier now that I’m back in the place that I wanted to be in. I had started to feel like, oh I hate this, why am I doing this, I hate this job. Leaving was never about the kids at my old district, I loved my kids. But everything else was kind of bogging me down and making me drag my feet. But now I feel great at my new school, people are willing to change, listen, and are open…

Carrie: It must be nice to be working with people who are more open to that without having to fight and you feel invigorated. You just don’t want to lose that spark.

[Ava]: I don’t know, I feel fine, I like my job. I’m excited by it. Like I started to have the ideas churning again; what can I do to make it more inviting and exciting? For my students to care more (because right now they’re kind of in that slump where it’s just like this is stupid), and help them get out of that. I think they’re picking up that we’re excited right now and that they should be excited too. I just hope it stays like this for the rest of the time that I work.
For participants who planned to stay, like Ava, classroom teaching remained a viable option because they could continue to envision the changes that their resistance would have on the lives of their students. By focusing on their students and the tangible changes they could make in their individual lives and contexts, they felt empowered to continue to work within systems that were not aligned with their underlying belief systems because they saw the difference they were making within it.

**Concluding thoughts and limitations of framework**

Participants’ conceptions of their level of support, both institutionally and through social support networks, played a key role in their perceived ability to act as agents of change as public school teachers. These notions of support were central to their approach to identity maintenance. Impressions of being supported or not (including the level, reliance, multitude, and authenticity of support) mediated participants’ feelings of belonging and/or alienation in systems of public and special education. Support had a considerable influence on the perceived efficacy of their professional identities as teachers in public schools. Vital to their individual constructions of mutuality within their individual school and district contexts was the support afforded them by school leadership and administration. Participants positioned authentic, open, and collegial school leadership as significantly affecting how they described their overall satisfaction and longevity within the field. It led many to reconsider the work they could do. Although it was not a straight or perfect cadence, their perceptions of support led the majority of participants to question their longevity and retention within the system as critically conscious, socially just educators. The system and individuals working to maintain it (intentionally or not) persuaded many of these teachers to believe that they
were better suited to work outside of the system in order to disrupt it. Feelings of hopelessness led them to pursue alternative means of breaking down ableist tendencies that seemed to proliferate and expand since of the implementation the standards and accountability reform movement. But without individuals like them working as public school teachers, who will do this daily work within schools?

Participants’ framework for school transformation was limited, since it depended on the transference and internalization of these ideologies to other individuals. Further, if all individuals who had these types of identities were unable to subsist within the system for some time, then how would they expect other individuals to do the same? Can short-term occupations of our schools and districts lead to any viable transformation? Even more, can new individuals persist within a system that has increasingly attempted to de-professionalize the teaching profession and force? Would any new critically conscious educators persist? Their solution, although supportive of their own identity maintenance and occupation, was reliant and interdependent on other individuals’ ability to persevere. I could relate to their perspective since that is why I had chosen to pursue my PhD. What other viable solutions could my participants lean on within a system that had increasingly isolated and secluded their underlying belief systems?
In this dissertation study, I have explored how eleven teachers who espouse alignment with and identify as DSE understand and practice their underlying belief systems within today’s schools. Through repeated phenomenological interviewing, I exposed the daily work that participants engaged within and named as DSE in relation to their classroom practices, their work with colleagues and parents, and the social support networks they took up in order to sustain themselves. The data I collected and analyzed mapped out and unearthed what it meant to these eleven educators to practice their DSE identities as public school teachers in a variety of contexts across the United States. By sharing their stories, I provided a glimpse into the ways participants conceptualized and experienced their underlying commitments in relation to their professional lives as educators.

The internalization of a critically conscious and socially just teaching identity, such as DSE, was a powerful and transformative force for my participants. My participants were passionate about the tenets of DSE, and their internalization of these ideological commitments shaped who they were and what they believed about the purpose of schooling in relation to their work with students, parents, families, and colleagues. DSE offered a framework for understanding that participants could go back to and lean on, one which helped them make sense of who they were in relation to their ongoing work in their classrooms and schools and the field of teaching. Like all teaching
identities, teachers used and refined their identities through the knowledges acquired and adopted through their experiences working in and within their individual schooling contexts (Sutherland et al., 2010). Erika described the deep and personal attachment she had to this belief system both personally and professionally:

I mean I can tell you how horrible I felt when that genetics nurse said let’s take care of that baby because she might turn out like your son when I thought my son was the coolest kid in the world. I’ve been there and know what the medical model and these deficit ideas do personally. And I don’t want them [my students and families] to ever feel like that.

As Erika posited, DSE provided a powerful reframing of disability and special education that altered participants’ underlying belief systems and pushed them to find ways to assert, insert, reframe, and manipulate contexts and utilize the systems in which they were employed toward these commitments. Even with these deep commitments to social justice and re-storying disability, participants struggled daily to navigate and consistently find space to enact and remain true to these identities. These difficulties led many of my participants to question their own place and the place that DSE held within the current educational culture and environment. In order to fully conclude this study, I will summarize my findings from the data chapters and then I will discuss specific implications that emerged from the study in relation to DSE in both K-12 and teacher education.

**Summary of Findings**

In Chapter 4, I discussed how participants’ DSE belief systems manifested in their classroom pedagogies and practices, specifically focusing on what participants named as
DSE within their interactions with students. With ample opportunities for practice, participants named the classroom as a principal site for operationalizing their individual aims and commitments (de Certeau, 1989). Although in many ways the practices that educators leaned on could be construed as simply inclusive pedagogy, participants persistently named each as part of their DSE practices. With that in mind, the discussion included the specific ways that participants utilized their teaching practices to reframe deficit and medically based understandings of difference and disability toward a presumption of competence understood within the sociocultural framework. Poignantly, Yvonne described her understanding of what the idea of presuming competence and the sociocultural framework meant in relation to her work:

If I look in these classrooms, kids who do not follow the norm, who learn differently ... aren’t considered smart. That idea is reproduced in the world around us. I just think of the school as a microcosm for the world. When did we come to this point in time that there is not human variation? But today we assume that if a get gets a 70 there is something wrong with them. We even have this hierarchy of disability, where kids with ED or ID they are seen as less than. They are presumed to be unable within the classroom. I try to work past that and consider how I am teaching and thinking about my students.

By working past the continued and ongoing reiteration of disability and difference as inherently less than, Yvonne and participants attempted to move beyond and challenge many of these traditionally limiting frameworks within their classroom practices. By understanding schooling and disability within a sociocultural framework and taking up a philosophy and belief system that presumed the competence, my participants examined
how they might alter their own practices to support all learners. Through this stance, they attempted to develop spaces that accepted, normalized, and celebrated the diversity of learners and backgrounds. Participants therefore reaffirmed what much of DSE literature says on DSE and teaching through their attempts to restory disability and difference (Rice, 2008; Thompson; 2011; Ware, 2005). Part of this work included developing classrooms that openly and authentically discussed disability, learning differences, and diversity as vital to the classroom culture.

A large aspect of this chapter included participants’ discussion about how they created spaces that supported and honored varied notions of support and interdependency. Central to participants’ understanding and experience was explicit discussion on fairness versus equality with their students. This included open and authentic dialogue that attempted to normalize varying and multiple mechanisms of support that focused on the personalization of learning. In order to further stabilize their classroom culture, participants discussed embedding explicit instructive strategies that attempted to trouble conceptions of normalcy and commonsense in order to make sense of and stay true to their underlying teaching identity and commitments (Beijard et al., 2004; Britzman, 2003). Participants discussed and promoted the concept of differentiation as a useful mechanism to actively challenge and reassign meaning to many of the assumptive forces of performance and competition that saturate schooling. They also attempted to provide direct instruction to their students that encouraged recognition of individual differences as a natural and normal part of existence. One mechanism that participants utilized was centering their instruction on these differences as valuable and worthwhile to the child’s own identity, although some of this classroom work was complicated by many of the
material realities and structures of schooling and society. For example, within spaces that were segregated, participants took time to teach directly toward disability as an aspect of identity by providing an authentic and natural space for students to learn about disability and to self-advocate. Interestingly, I found that only the two participants of color used the classroom as a space to teach directly about and trouble how race has been socially constructed within the United States. This might speak to how their identities as individuals of color was central to the professional teaching identity, as well as their agency as educators (Giroux, 1983; Walkington, 2005). This chapter also pointed out the ways in which participants’ work within their classrooms was made more complicated and limited by time and standards.

Participants’ fidelity to their moral and political obligations was often challenged by the multiple and varied competing demands of accountability and standardization. The integration of scripted curriculum, non-culturally relevant standardized curriculum, and an overreliance on test preparation complicated many participants’ enactment of their underlying commitments. In some instances, participants found ways to meet the minimum standard of the obligation to standardization and accountability, while still maintaining allegiance to their own professional beliefs, therefore satisfying their underlying DSE commitments. Participants placed value on these notions of resistance and found ways to use their tactics as isolated subversions within larger systems of control (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Giroux, 1983; Ollin, 2005).

On the other hand, the majority of participants discussed how the initiatives of state and national educational reform movements had fundamentally constrained their ability to do what they believed was best for their students, therefore making it difficult to
stay true to their underlying pedagogical values. This included their opportunities to engage in culturally responsive pedagogical practices and to explicitly trouble the curriculum (and notions of accountability) in a manner that they believed would most benefit their students. By putting the current reform movement ahead of their students’ needs, educators struggled to maintain meaningful opportunities to enact their identities. Some participants discussed this in relation to feeling they were “abandoning” their ideological commitments in order to meet the constraints of accountability. Amelia, a participant who identifies as disabled and has a visible disability, even pointed out that she believed she had been “ability profiled” (Collins, 2013) because of her schools focus on the increased demands. Participants, such as Amelia, felt that their continuing role and commitments as teachers were increasingly threatened. Like research has shown about many teachers working within the reform movement, participants felt a loss of autonomy about the choices they could make within their classroom practice which impacted their overall sense of self (Harvey-Koeplin, 2006; Schniedewind, 2012). This finding also aligned with and corroborates what literature has found on the continued de-professionalization and de-valuation of the teaching profession as whole (Au, 2011; Ravich, 2013; Valli & Buese, 2007). Finally, this chapter pointed out the damage that these reforms have had on participants’ overall commitment to inclusive education, since a number of participants suggested that they could more easily meet the needs of their students within segregated placements. This finding corroborates what literature has repeatedly stated is the “toll” that reform has had on individual teachers ability to practice their ideological commitments (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Decker & Bolt, 2008). The realities of working within today’s schooling contexts that are limited by the focus of
accountability and standardization seemed to have fractured one of the underlying and core concepts of DSE to these educators.

In Chapter 5, I detailed participants’ complex utilization of various tactics to maneuver and negotiate their DSE commitments with colleagues and parents; I characterized this work as resistance. In general, participants identified the tactics of “picking your battles” and “working the cracks” as methods in which they were provided meaningful opportunities to assert their identities in satisfying and often tangible ways. My participants used these individual forms of resistance to assert and maintain their identities within systems that did not align with their pedagogical beliefs (Connell, 1995; Giroux, 1983). Both of these tactics were reliant on relationships, along with participants’ understanding and utilization of their knowledge of the systems of special and public education within their schools, to maneuver within it. Ava described the operationalization of these tactics in relation to individual contexts and her move to a new school, “Right now … I’m trying to feel everybody out like what can I say because I don’t want to kind of create the same situation as last time where people just automatically shut down with me.” Ava’s assertions about her new school point to the deeply rooted notion that before engaging within active resistance work as an educator, you must make attempts to understand the mechanisms, procedures, and hidden curriculum of your individual school, district, and colleagues. This concept resonated with all participants’ engagement within their attempts at transgressive work. Participants described part of their work asserting their commitments to DSE as a constant negotiation. Each had to decide when and with whom to engage in explicit reframing and exposing of their ideological commitments. Thus, across all situations, participants
exercised a considerable amount of caution in their resistance work with colleagues and parents, since participants understood that DSE was diametrically opposed to special education and could be construed as dangerous. As I suggested, their utilization of these tactics operated as a form of “strategic pragmatism” (Lock & Kaufert, 1998), since their engagement within tactics provided them the space to assert their supposed radical ideologies in increasingly conservative schooling contexts. Nevertheless, participants positioned their use of tactics as a method to ensure ongoing and marked progress toward spaces that were more aligned with their identities and to maintain a positive sense of self (Bushnell, 2003). This framework offered individuals an opportunity to find ways to work against the system while remaining within it (de Certeau, 1984). Participants engagement in these tactics corroborates much of the literature base on teacher identity, agency, and resistance (Bushnell, 2003; Montaño & Burnstein, 2006; Ollin, 2005). This dissertation also expands on the framework and tools that teachers can utilize in their resistance work. Nonetheless, educators felt extremely limited in what they could do on a daily basis.

Although educators maintained a semblance of self and a sense of power throughout these instances of reframing and exposing, they felt extremely constrained by an increasingly surveilled and routinized system of public and special education. The reliance on selective reframing and exposure was at times extremely unsettling to participants. Each felt a sense of disloyalty to her or his underlying belief and value systems in which she or he wrestled internally on a daily basis with the repercussions that maintaining the system and remaining silent had for their students. As Erica recalled:

But I mean I just don’t know. It’s so frustrating and it’s hard to be quiet and be
still in the moments when you know that it’s not the best for your students and what are you supposed to do?

Throughout participants’ discussions, I found each consistently describing their actions as restricted by what they could do, when they could do it, and whom they could trust. This fact led participants to seldom speak back without assurance, except in situations where a child or family faced blatant discrimination that foreseeably could have serious educational consequences for the student and her or his future. These instances most often occurred around behavior and notably regarding children of color. Although participants were unsuccessful in their attempts to speak out for the child and family, they felt to do otherwise would go against and extremely fracture their moral commitments and obligations. Although participants leaned on tactics to meet their ideological commitments in some way, they were acutely aware that they did not have the ability and/or power to fully enact their DSE identities within their current and individual schooling contexts. Participant’s individual level of resistance at their schools and within their districts was extremely unsettling to them, reconfirming Achinstein and Ogawa’s (2006) assertion that “individual resistance is not enough to sustain the resistance or the individual” (p. 58). Ultimately, their reliance on these tactics as a means to stay true to their underlying belief systems and commitments left the majority of participants unsatisfied with their continued role as classroom teachers.

In the sixth chapter, I began by investigating the various social support networks and resources that participants leveraged in their ongoing subversive work as public school teachers. These social support networks were vital to the participants’ perceived abilities to act on their obligations and feel a sense of hope for change as public school
teachers. I characterized these networks as social support networks, since overwhelmingly the participants relied on close, collaborative relationships and resources that were interactive in some manner. At the forefront of participants’ networks were like-minded individuals who included colleagues and/or people who were part of the disability studies cohort and program with whom they had direct and ongoing contact. Participants utilized these individuals and groups as sounding boards to problem solve and problematize their individual schooling contexts, as well as their continuing and evolving commitments to DSE. By and large, this first level of support “provided them with an opportunity to review and reconstruct their work, to discover its important and essential aspects as well as the kinds of intentions that oriented it” (Estola et al., 2010, p. 252). Participants’ second level of social support included faculty from their DSE-grounded and -influenced programs. In general, I found that participants positioned faculty as consultants to draw on when needed. At the same time, they also perceived faculty- and university-sponsored online resources and networks as part of the support that were provided within their overall support networks. Overwhelmingly, participants identified individual faculty members’ (or program) social media profiles and virtual resources that were posted as consistent devices that they leveraged and drew on. Participants use of online networks as a source of support significantly bolsters and expands how we might envision and cultivate support networks in the future for socially just and critically conscious educators (Forte et al., 2012; Sela, 2013). Virtual resources provided participants with easy access to an online network, as well as a learning community that supported their continuing refinement and maintenance of their identities.
The second part of this chapter examined the crucial relationship between administrator support and participants’ experiences asserting their underlying commitments and beliefs. Within situations where participants felt authentically supported by school leadership, they placed their administrators as part of and central to their social support network. Participants who were afforded this type of relationship described feeling overwhelmingly supported and able to envision school- and district-level changes that would support their overall belief systems. In these instances, I found that participants believed that school leadership trusted and were responsive to their underlying belief systems. Conversely, participants who felt that the support from school leadership was either inauthentic or absent also felt increasingly isolated from their school communities. Participants who lacked open and authentic support were significantly impacted by the lack of camaraderie and honesty that school leadership shared with them and the school community. Within these situations, participants described feeling an ever-increasing and incessant loss of any hope for social justice and DSE within their schools and districts. Under these assumptions, participants began to feel even less like their identities had a place in today’s public school contexts. As literature has stated repeatedly, school leadership plays an integral role in teacher’s emotional and professional well being, as well as in their daily work and job satisfaction (Billeysley, 2006; Lueken et al. 2004; Wong, 2004). This finding further collaborates and expands on the role that administrators play in either fostering critically conscious and socially just educators or disempowering and disenfranchising them (Hehir & Katzman, 2011). With this in mind, this chapter subsequently unearthed the tensions that
participants had increasingly begun to experience that led them to question their ability to stay in this field for some time.

This dissertation ended with my participants’ discussion about their persistence in the field of public education. Many participants discussed leaving the field in light of the ongoing demands of public and special education that restrained their abilities to enact their pedagogical commitments. It led many participants to describe their identities and place within public schooling as becoming increasingly hopeless, frustrating, and isolating. This finding sits in a similar light to what research on teacher resistance has previously found, resistance remains difficult and can be extremely isolating (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Gibby-Wachter, 2000; Parkinson, 2008). Since the majority of participants felt that they would be unable to maintain some allegiance to their underlying belief systems and commitments, leaving became the only viable option. Thus, in order to stay true to their identities, the majority of participants described the necessity to seek out alternative opportunities and means to practice their identities.

This dissertation, then, contributes to the field by providing a glimpse into the ongoing work that teachers who espouse critical identities, such as DSE, take up within today’s K-12 schools. The text exposed the multitude of improvisations that participants made to enact their underlying commitments, along with the limitations they had in practicing their belief systems. Overall, I contend that taking up an alternative conceptualization of schooling and special education is difficult and arduous work reconfirming previous research on teacher resistance (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Bushnell, 2003; Gibby-Watchter, 2000; Parkinson, 2008). Nevertheless, as this dissertation exhibited, without an opportunity to practice their identities in some way, through their
utilization of tactics and with a variety of social supports, participants’ identities would have been left at even more of risk for fracturing and abandonment.

The current conceptualization of schooling continues to constrain teachers opportunities to enact their belief systems in meaningful ways (Au, 2011; Harvey-Koelpin, 2006; Sapon-Shevin & Schneidewind, 2012). Nevertheless, since DSE asks teachers to be change agents, resistance (in some way) remained central to their pedagogical commitments and practice (Ashby, 2012; Smith, 2010). My participants resistance points to the power that DSE continues to have in transforming individuals to act on and towards these internalized commitments (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Broderick et al., 2008; Broderick et al., 2011; Routel, 2013; Ware, 2005). The work that participants took up in relation to their identities may seem small in relation to other forms of resistance, but it afforded them a space to maintain allegiance to their underlying belief systems and pedagogical commitments. Nonetheless, although these types of resistances by individual teachers is a starting point, it is not enough to sustain individuals or their resistance efforts within an already constrained system (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Bushnell, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003; Montaño & Burnstein, 2006).

Overwhelmingly as this dissertation found, teachers who choose to actively resist the dominant discourses of school feel increasingly isolated in their work. Thus, teachers who take up these stances need more opportunities and access to both formal and informal networks of support in order to collaborate with one another (Ritchie, 2012). By developing a critically communities of practice, socially just and critically conscious teachers can be provided with emotional support, as well as a space to re-energize their practice by sharing contextualized resistance and teaching ideas (Lieberman &
McLaughlin, 1992; Montaño & Burnstein, 2006; Ritchie, 2012). Further these support networks provide teachers a sense of belonging that might further sustain their identity work and persistence within the field as some participants found.

Overall I contend that this dissertation provides an opportunity to share and contextualize the complex struggles and negotiations that our k-12 teachers face within an extremely constrained system. Through this research, I offer the field a closer look at what it means to maintain a critically conscious and socially just practice within today’s schools. Listening to my participant’s stories heightened my overall awareness of the dire need for transparent discussions with in-service and pre-service teachers about working within and through today’s schools. I hope that this dissertation offers teacher educators and DSE scholars a sense of urgency in further addressing and understanding this need.

Implications

When I began this study, I had hopes of unearthing what it meant to take up a DSE identity within today’s public schools. I understood this work as complicated and was curious about how practicing teachers’ pedagogical commitments to re-storying dominant notions of ability unfolded and were realized in K-12. As a hopeful scholar, I wanted to gain a richer and deeper understanding of what aspects of DSE translated, materialized, and dissipated through participants’ internalization of critical consciousness around disability and special education. I wondered how were teachers resisting within schools and systems that by their very nature stigmatize and marginalize disability and difference? Part of this work was selfish on my part, since I myself espouse a DSE identity and attempt to disrupt my own teacher education students’ commonsense understandings of disability. However, the investigation of these teachers’ daily
negotiations in enacting their underlying ideological commitments and identities has broader implications to the field (outside of my own curiosity). In this dissertation, my participants and I raised concerns about how we are preparing teachers to do critically conscious and socially just work that challenges many of the traditional ways in which we continue to conceptualize schooling. The stories that my participants shared with me about their work within the field point to a variety of repercussions not only for the work of educating future teachers, but in relation to the continuing work of teachers who espouse and take up critical identities and commitments within the field. In what follows, I discuss what my participants’ experiences teach us about furthering the goals of critically conscious work within teacher education and K-12.

Socially just and critical-consciousness-raising teacher education. Teacher education programs must provide explicit instruction on working in today’s schools and classrooms with a critically conscious identity, such as DSE. As this study exhibits, the ever-increasing systemization of schooling leads to diminished opportunities for teachers to enact critically conscious and socially just pedagogical commitments (Ball, 1999; Connell, 1995; Halpin et al., 2000; Smyth, 2001). Since we continue to exist within systems of public schooling that are overly preoccupied by performance and standardization, teacher education must take this into account and prepare our teacher education candidates for the lived realities of working within these systems, while concurrently helping them question and resist them. In order to support practicing teachers’ and teacher candidates’ maintenance and allegiance to critical-consciousness-raising ideologies, such as DSE, teacher education programs and institutions must provide teacher education candidates with deep and rich understandings of the
mechanisms of schooling that stabilize difference as undesirable. Part of this work for teacher education is having honest and ongoing dialogue with pre-service teachers about who accountability and standardization currently benefits, including discussing racial, sexist, classist, and ableist test biases and curriculum. Talking to students about the current realities of schooling cannot be a one-time conversation, but must be a consistent discussion on what schools currently look like and how they (as future teachers) can work to expose and disrupt these prejudices through their everyday work within school and with their students.

In conjunction, we must create spaces within college classrooms to explicitly discuss, engage, and model pedagogical practices that work toward change aligned with these underlying commitments. To do this, teacher educators have to teach pre-service teachers about specific and general teaching practices that disrupt commonsense notions embedded in the curriculum and in many day-to-day practices (Oyler, 2011). This could include specific instruction and modeling about disrupting deficit-based dialogue, practice and collaboration with parents as advocates, and discussion and dissection of what teacher candidates are experiencing within field placements. I imagine that this space would provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage in specific self-reflection that supports their ability to navigate placements in relation to their underlying commitments and philosophy. Explicit discussion and practice is vital, since so many of the participants struggled with maintaining their own autonomy and commitments to DSE and social justice, while practicing their identities within today’s schools. In order to navigate these disjunctures, teacher education must provide instruction and resources to pre-service and practicing teachers that explicitly support students’ challenging of the
current commonsense conceptualizations of public schooling, special education, and public education during and after their teacher education programs.

Teacher education programs must also work to explicitly foster relationships with practicing teachers who embody and offer classrooms that espouse many of the ideological commitments of DSE. Teacher education students need opportunities to experience how DSE manifests itself within the classroom, particularly in regard to today’s schooling contexts. Part of that work is finding opportunities for pre-service students to observe and be part of a true inclusive field, student teaching, and clinically rich placements. Truly inclusive placements move beyond a conception of inclusion as just getting students with disabilities into the classroom toward positioning difference (disability or otherwise) as a natural and necessary part of human existence (Ashby, 2012). These types of schools and classrooms do not have spaces that are designated as inclusive, but embody a sense of diversity as necessary and central to the whole school culture. Further, truly inclusive schools rely on differentiation and universal design to assure the successful and meaningful participation of all students from the onset. It moves beyond an understanding of inclusion as a social and/or moral cause to a belief that it is a civil right (Valle & Connor, 2011).

Although true inclusive placements are part of that vision, we must also provide students with opportunities to see how to practice DSE within their classrooms and schools in ways that move beyond simply including all students. I bring this point up because it was highly significant to me that none of my participants explicitly taught disability as part of the curriculum, although it remains a central tenet of DSE (Valle & Connor, 2011). I was expecting my participants to discuss the variety of ways in which
they used and embedded disability directly into the curriculum. In many ways, simply including students with disabilities within the general education classroom remained the central goal of educators’ resistance work. Was this because it was a tangible goal that they could work toward? Or because participants felt that other elements of DSE were unattainable or unimaginable within their respective contexts? Or is the work of including all students still very much left unfinished in K-12 schools? Nevertheless, for practicing teachers, inclusion was still very much positioned as who we teach, rather than what we teach. Teacher education programs and institutions that are grounded in DSE must provide teacher candidates with tangible opportunities to experience DSE as part of a multitude of practices and conceptualizations leading to transformative visions of the classroom as a space that challenges the status quo and includes all students. For one thing, teacher education programs need to model how to embed disability into the curriculum as a valuable interdisciplinary tool (Ware, 2001). This could include the utilization and integration of relevant fiction and nonfiction texts, current events, and media sources that act as a starting point for teacher education students to engage in dialogue centered on social justice, oppression, intersectionality, civil rights, and advocacy that could be transferred to their future K-12 classrooms (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Connor & Gabel, 2013).

Further, teacher education candidates must have meaningful and authentic experiences with individuals with disabilities. Since the majority of my participants described having close, personal relationships with individuals identified with disabilities, they naturally understood these individuals as valuable members of their lives. At the same time, these relationships helped participants develop deep and
meaningful frameworks for understanding the discrimination that individuals with disabilities continue to face as a result of ableism and how society has constructed disability and special education. Supporting Hodge & Jasma’s (1999) conclusion, in order to ensure our teacher education students internalize alternative frameworks about disability that attempt to dismantle medical and deficit-based understandings of disability that reproduce inequity, students must be provided with rich and meaningful opportunities to develop authentic and ongoing relationships with individuals identified with a variety of disabilities.

Teacher education programs need to support their graduates as agents of change who must actively and openly resist discourses that reaffirm special education as a viable and commonsense conceptualization. Although using tactics provided participants with a purview of power that allowed them to practice their underlying commitments in some way, tactics also left participants overwhelmingly feeling silenced and unsatisfied. We must find ways to support teachers’ continuing resistance in more authentic and meaningful ways that provide them space to consistently uphold their underlying belief systems and commitments. One aspect of that work is having teacher education spend time preparing teachers to understand that fact going into their careers; they will face resistance from other educators with whom they come into contact (Dotger & Ashby, 2010). Pre-service teachers need to know and understand that their critically conscious and social justice-centered philosophy is not the norm and does not always operate as part of schools, and they must also be ready to fight and stand up for those commitments. Fear of being perceived as out of compliance and unprofessional led many participants to tread lightly within all situations; we must find ways to empower educators to speak up when
faced with discrimination and social injustice. This should include the development of consistent, dynamic, and formal teacher social support networks and resources that assist pre-service, novice, and veteran teachers in their ongoing subversive and transformative work (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Ritchie, 2012). Too often, teachers are left to develop these networks and resources themselves; as teacher education institutions, we should both identify and construct critical communities of practice and make them readily available to our students and other like-minded professionals (Ritchie, 2012). Teacher education needs to “develop strategies and interventions to support quality teachers and look(s) to extended professional communities to sustain alternative visions in the face of the status quo” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 60).

Creating a framework for the infusion of DSE and social justice in K-12.

Teachers practicing in K-12 need to find ways to actively trouble normalcy and infuse culturally relevant and responsive content into their classrooms. Teachers must provide meaningful and explicit instruction to their students that attends directly to difference. As described above, I was surprised by the lack of content that participants took up in explicitly troubling dominant notions of difference within their classroom curriculum, specifically about disability and race. Yvonne and Ava, the only two educators of color, explicitly discussed their ongoing dialogue and infusion of race with their students. At the same time, both stated that they should have infused content on disability, but had not yet. If individuals who espouse a DSE identity do not infuse disability into the curriculum, then it begs the question, who else will? Disability continued to be positioned as an insignificant knowledge for their students. By infusing disability into the curriculum, teachers can begin to break down and challenge many of
the socially constructed notions about disability, as well as provide a space for students to understand disability as a natural part of human variation (Valle & Connor, 2011; Rice, 2008; Ware, 2005). This would provide their students an opportunity to question and engage in a deeper and richer understanding of disability and ableism.

In a similar vein, as mentioned above, only Ava and Whitney explicitly troubled race and racism with their students. Although all educators engaged in some ways with culturally relevant pedagogical practices, they failed to significantly trouble race in a meaningful way with their students. White teachers, who overwhelmingly make up the teaching workforce, should be infusing and discussing race and racism as relevant aspects of the curriculum within their classrooms. Race should be a central topic, particularly considering the prevalence of such discourses within our nation. I was disheartened by the lack of curriculum that educators used in relation to difference. Moreover, a number of participants discussed that some, if not the majority of their students, were of color. White teachers need to feel comfortable and confident talking about and taking up issues of race and ethnicity with their students, as well as integrating diversity and difference into their curricula (Epstein & Gist, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013). That is to say, we must find ways to support K-12 teachers in becoming culturally and racially proficient in order for teachers to promote meaningful and authentic conversations about race and about difference with their students (Howard, 2003).

Similarly, teachers and administrators need to find ways to more effectively and consistently empower their students and families. Engaging parents and families about their rights under special education law and within schools should not be left to one or two individuals throughout the course of the child’s schooling career. School personnel
need to find ways to provide active and ongoing support to parents and families as they navigate the processes of schooling in meaningful ways that promote opportunities for “cultural reciprocity” among all stakeholders (Kalyunpur & Harry, 2012). At times, participants leaned on deficit-based assumptions that disempowered the language of parents and families as collaborative partners, particularly for families of color. Teachers and school leaders need to be consider and mindful of the multiple levels of oppression that they are attempting to disrupt. Teachers and administrators must find ways to both educate students and families about their rights and privilege parents’ and families’ knowledge about their children.

Finally, school administrators must be educated in social justice and inclusive frameworks in order to better understand special education and disability as perpetuating marginalization. Administrators need to be made more knowledgeable about these frameworks in order to engage in authentic and meaningful conversations about special education with a variety of stakeholders, including teachers. Too often, participants felt at risk and isolated by the lack of cohesion between administrator understanding and their own visions for their students and the school. School administration needs to be provided with opportunities to internalize these knowledges as relevant aspects of their own identity. This could be accomplished by either engaging in more formalized training or providing space for informal learning about these frameworks. This might lead to more salient opportunities for collegiality and collaboration among administrators and teachers that support schools and districts working toward school change and social justice.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of implications, these suggestions point overwhelmingly to the heightened need for ongoing and meaningful connections between
K-12 and higher education institutions. Overall, as a field of study, scholars in DSE must begin to take how DSE is being translated and internalized by teacher education students and within K-12 settings more seriously. If teacher education grounded by the commitments of DSE continues to ignore the dire needs of our future and current K-12 teachers, then whom will we look to in K-12 to take up this cause? Eight out of my eleven participants had plans to leave the field of teaching because they had no sense of place for themselves within it. Teachers in K-12 need more substantive support in sustaining themselves within today’s current schooling contexts. As a field, we must think deeply regarding what opportunities there are for authentic engagement and meaningful conversation about maintaining teachers who have underlying belief systems aligned with DSE and social justice. If teachers who believe in DSE are abandoning their respective teaching posts, what long-term impact can DSE have to unseat and challenge the oppressive systems of special education and public education? As a field, DSE needs to both find and develop tools that support teachers’ underlying belief systems and ability to stay in the field for some time. My dissertation study provides only a glimpse of how DSE is being conceptualized by teachers in K-12 settings and is therefore significantly limited in generalizing the field. In order to more fully explore and understand the experiences of public school teachers who espouse a DSE identity, more substantive research must be completed.

Limitations and Future Research

My dissertation has only provided a glimpse into the experiences and practices of teachers who identify as DSE and, therefore, the scope of this dissertation is limited in a number of ways. First, this dissertation is limited in that it addresses the experiences of
only eleven educators who were selected utilizing purposeful and snowball sampling, although I have drawn connections between these experiences they are not wholly representative of the experiences of all educators who espouse a DSE identity. Only these eleven teachers’ perspectives were shared, recorded, and analyzed. Further, the eleven teachers who were part of the study were overwhelmingly white, female, and taught in elementary settings. Moreover, although participants teach in a variety of settings, the majority of them are drawn from special education and elementary backgrounds. These limitations constrict the range of understanding with the phenomenon. Therefore, it is likely that these findings over-represent the experiences of educators working within special education and within elementary school. This trend in participants speaks to the clear and continued delineation between special and general education within credentialing programs, particularly within elementary school. It also speaks to an understanding that much of the work around inclusion and disability studies is occurring within elementary school. In addition, although work was done to engage with a variety of individuals working within and across urban, suburban, and rural schools, the majority of participants worked within suburban school environments. Therefore, it is likely these findings over-represent the experiences of predominately white, middle class, and “high achieving” schools. Although a majority of the teachers stated that most of their students (those identified as SPED or in need) were from diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds; this fact not only speaks to the continued methods of cultural exclusion that disability has come to signify, but also limits the study since participants are not wholly represented in the experiences of all educators whom espouse an DSE identity. The study and data collected would have been significantly bolstered by the
recruitment of more participants, as well as more participants who identified as of color, as male, and as working across a variety of school settings. This might have been accomplished through recruitment efforts that were broader and less specific, since I used DSE networks to recruit and DSE remains a relatively small field of inquiry. In order to provide a more full and broad representation of teachers who espouse DSE commitments and values and understand the unique voices and experiences that make up this field, additional research should include a larger base of participants.

Another limitation of the research is the method of data collection that I decided to engage within. Although I attempted to provide a non-judgmental space to engage within a conversation with my participants, there were times when participants asked questions such as “is that what you were looking for?” These questions led me to believe that, at times, participants felt as though they had to prove something to me; I asked myself a few times if participants felt compelled to perform their identity to me (Bettie, 2014). Not only did that mean that I hadn’t created a space that my participants felt wholly comfortable in, therefore, was the data a true representation of their identity? I believe this may have been ameliorated and made significantly more robust by observations within each of the participants’ classrooms over an extended period of time. These observations would have provided me with valuable insight into the manners in which their daily routines and practices connected with their identities as educators, as well as helped me to ensure the validity of the representations that participants were describing in their interviews. Even though the physical distance between the majority of my participants and me made observations within their classrooms and at their schools prohibitive, this data could have strengthened and provided a fuller glimpse of this
phenomenon within my overall findings and framework for understanding. Although phenomenological interviewing provided lots of rich data and details about how they took up their commitments and beliefs to DSE, observation data would have provided me with clearer and more practical implications around practicing a DSE identity within today’s schools. In future endeavors, I hope to include observational data collection.

Further although I collected, reviewed, and utilized the teacher-produced documents to help enrich and broaden my own understanding of how this identity manifests within today’s public schools, I did not thoroughly analyze or include any of these data sources. I decided not to include these within the study because of the inconsistency in types of documents that teachers provided to me. In the future I would try to provide more specific instructions on the types of documents I was seeking. This data could have significantly bolstered the readers’ understanding of this phenomenon and provided practice-based examples that other teachers and researchers could lean on in order to more fully conceptualize what a DSE identity looks like within specific teacher work. In future research, I would like to more thoroughly analyze and embed many of these teacher-produced documents to both heighten my own analysis and provide more substantive tools to support teacher educators and K-12 teachers in practicing their commitments to DSE.

This dissertation has led me to think about and question how critically conscious and socially just teacher education programs can further expand and meet many of the needs that individuals attempting to practice DSE still experience. In general, I would like to increase the focus of this work and help fill many of the gaps that still exist in understanding and envisioning what practicing a critically conscious identity, such as
DSE, can look like in today’s schools. This includes designing, implementing, and recording salient practices that align with and support DSE commitments, examining how we are teaching pre-service teachers about DSE in relation to their future role as public school teachers, and specific action-based research projects to support practicing teachers’ identity maintenance within K-12. One specific research project I would like to take on in order to fill a need that participants described is to develop and engage in specific action-based research that supports pre-service teachers and practicing teachers in critical-consciousness-raising and maintenance work. Particularly, I would like to develop a formal social support network in order to provide teacher education graduates and area teachers a space for both a knowledge sharing and problem solving that acts as a critical community of practice. I envision that the action research would include time and space for individuals involved to problematize and problem solve how to enact their underlying commitments within today’s schools. I plan on developing an online virtual support network, as well as an in-person collaborative inquiry circle that practicing teachers can draw on as an ongoing and consistent source for engagement both virtually and in person in maintaining critically conscious identities.

Final Thoughts

*I hang up. Nina just told me that she doesn’t think she can do this for much longer, this as in teaching, after only a year and a half. How hard must she feel the tensions? No matter; she was the eighth participant to tell me this. I can feel the sadness and weight of these words rise up inside me. What conclusions can I make about what teaching with commitments to disability studies and social justice does to individuals’ beliefs about making change? How does the daily toil and struggle of doing this work impact their persistence? How must they feel? Do they believe they are becoming more and more part of the “problem”? And therefore, participants have to make a choice between fighting the good fight or giving up? Why do these seem to be the only two viable options? I think back to myself, to my classroom... my choice to leave.*
I stand again at the front, nearly ten years ago, in the frame of a door, peering in. Returning to that chalkboard, the big black chalkboard; I write in big block letters, the soft whiteness of the chalk covers the tips of my thumb and index finger; Marcus looks down; Ryan’s head and arms fill the desk; a fight erupts; a desk flips; a thoughtful question is asked, one isn’t; these memories of this place fill me, faces and instances that have become eternalized as my teaching past. I return to where I once was, to where I saw me going, but I didn’t; I couldn’t. I stand without them. I became consistently stuck between the same phrases, the school’s values and expectations— we can’t do this; this is not how we’ve done it; these students can’t be included; riled with a few victories that I look back on and can smile about. But I still wrote the letter of resignation. I can remember the slow aching inside as each letter fell from my fingers to the keyboard. I couldn’t persist within it.

I stand now where I believe I can help us move beyond these spaces. But who will stand in those classrooms? Who will take up this work for some time? Who will remain within our public schools?

I end this dissertation where I began, reflecting on my own experience in relation to my participants. As I mentioned in chapter six, I too left my role as a public school teacher in order to pursue my PhD in order to have a larger impact on the field of teacher education. It was a difficult decision that I contemplate and continue to struggle with, but with which I have ultimately made peace. The near-majority consensus among my participants about leaving the field begs me to question and wonder how educators who identify and commit to DSE might remain in the field for some time? As evidenced by this dissertation, challenging and positioning oneself in opposition to many notions of public schooling and special education continues to be very difficult within today’s schooling contexts. Much of my participants’ subversive work was two-fold and required resistance across both overarching perceptions about disability and special education and in regard to the heightened demands of standardization and accountability. These simultaneous and seemingly ceaseless notions of commonsense with today’s schools made participants’ enacting of their DSE identities feel even more complex and complicated. Nonetheless, educators in this study attempted to develop classrooms and relationships with colleagues
and parents to reframe and expose alternative constructions that honored and talked back
to narrow definitions of ability and difference. The continued and ongoing labor that
these educators engaged within to honor their own belief systems and understanding of
schooling points to the power of DSE to transform educators and their practices.

By exposing the multiple ways in which these educators continued to ‘make do’
within the context of the demands of accountability and standardization, I offer the field
both hope and a call for action within the field of DSE. In learning from and about the
work of teachers who identify as DSE, we can more clearly recognize much of the hard
work that our teacher education graduates are engaging within, but we can also look to
the areas in which we need to improve our own practices as teacher educators and
institutions in order to better support their continued labor in the face of both traditional
understandings of disability and the ever-changing landscape of educational school
reform. By continuing to refine, question, and take action against a new paradigm of
disability, special education, and schooling, teacher educators and K-12 teachers can find
ways to re-cultivate and retain their underlying commitments to DSE and social justice.
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Appendix A
Initial Participant Questionnaire

Initial Participant Questionnaire
Please fill out as fully as possible, if you have any questions or need clarification please email Carrie at cerood@syr.edu

General information
First Name: enter first name here            Last Name: enter last name here

Which of the following best represents your racial or ethnic heritage? Choose all that apply:
☐ Non-Hispanic, White or Euro-American
☐ Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
☐ Latino or Hispanic American
☐ East Asian or Asian American
☐ South Asian or Indian American
☐ Middle Eastern or Arab American
☐ Native American or Alaskan Native
☐ Other
☐ Prefer not to respond

Gender identity (optional): enter gender identity here
Disability status (optional): enter disability status here

Educational background
Undergrad Institution(s) & degree(s) earned:
Enter institution(s) and degree(s) earned here

Graduate Institution(s) & degree(s) earned:
Enter institution(s) and degree(s) earned here

Disability Studies in Education Courses Taken (include course name/instructor):
Enter courses and instructors here

Teaching credentials and background:
Current Certification(s): enter current certification and state where it was awarded here

Current Position(s) (check all that apply):
☐ Special Education Teacher (enter subject(s)/grade(s) here)
☐ General Education Teacher (enter subject(s)/grade(s) here)
☐ Other (describe current position here)

Current teaching placement could be described as (check all that apply):
☐ Urban
☐ Suburban
☐ Rural
☐ Small
☐ Medium
☐ Large

**Number of year(s) in this position:** enter number of years teaching here

**Previous positions/placements (include number of years):** enter previous positions/placements and number of years here

**Any other experience(s) aligned with disability studies and inclusive education:** enter other experiences here
## Appendix B
### Participant Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Total Years Teaching</th>
<th>Teaching (rural/ urban) (elem/ high)</th>
<th>DSE courses taken</th>
<th>Race/Class/ Disability</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Self-Contained Preschool (Structured Autism course)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Suburban Large Preschool</td>
<td>PhD disability studies</td>
<td>White/ Female/ No disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Self-contained Elementary, previously inclusive co-teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural Medium Elementary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White/Female / No disability</td>
<td>GA- Center on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Inclusive co-teacher and resource</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Small Rural Elementary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White/ Female/ No disability</td>
<td>GA- Center on Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Inclusive co-teacher, self-contained content, and resource/ inclusive co-teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rural Small Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Latino/ White/ Female/ Not identified (history of anxiety &amp; depression</td>
<td>Grew up going to classes that were inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyra</td>
<td>Self-Contained Elementary (Behavior Focus)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Urban Large Elementary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White/ Female/ None</td>
<td>Brother identified with autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Resource, previously self-contained</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Suburban Medium Elementary</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/ Female/None</td>
<td>Inclusive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman</td>
<td>School Administrator (previously secondary self-contained)</td>
<td>11 teaching 3.5 months admin</td>
<td>Suburban Medium</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Male/ None</td>
<td>Adjunct and lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Current Position</td>
<td>Total Years Teaching</td>
<td>Teaching (rural/ urban) (elem/ high)</td>
<td>DSE courses taken</td>
<td>Race/Class/ Disability</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
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<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>AIS ELA High School</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Large Suburban Secondary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White/ Female/ Physical Disability</td>
<td>co-founded a disability committee and advocacy group in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Autism Specialist (Administrator, previously elementary and pre-school teacher)</td>
<td>7 teaching 1.5 admin</td>
<td>Medium Suburban</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Reading and AIS Middle School</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Suburban Medium Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>White/Male/ Auditory processing/ ADHD</td>
<td>Formed LD advocacy group during undergraduate years, Ph.D. dissertation on DSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Co-teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Large Urban Elementary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biracial/Black/ Female/ None</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DSE = Disability Studies
Appendix C
Foundational Interview Guide

1) Describe your current role

2) Describe the specific training you have had related to disability studies (e.g., courses, training, assignments, professional development).


4) How do you see disability studies fitting within the current reform agenda in education? In regards to accountability assessments? In regards to curriculum? In regards to student placement? In regards to your own teaching evaluations?

5) Can you talk about a time when your disability studies orientation and training collided in your practice within schools. What types of resistance did you face?

6) Tell me about a time when you advocated on behalf of a student

7) Tell me about a time when you have faced barriers to advocating on behalf of a student or family.

8) What types of support do you utilize? If you needed support where would you go for this help? Online? Specific individuals?

9) How do you stay updated on disability studies and disability studies pedagogy?

10) In what ways, do you or do you not feel supported by your administration in utilizing disability studies and social justice pedagogy within your classroom? Within your school? Within your community?

11) Is there anything else you would like to share related to your experiences to disability studies?

12) Is there something else I should have asked?
Figure 1
Data Collection Methods

1. Interview
2. Artifact and Document Collection
3. First Round of Data Analysis
4. Second Round of Data Analysis
5. Third Interview (If Needed)
6. First Round of Data Analysis
7. Interview 2
8. Final Analysis
### First In Depth Analysis
- Listening to Experience From Participants Point of View
- Preliminary Analysis & Initial Connections Between and Within Transcripts

### Second In Depth Analysis
- Re-read for Emergent Themes and Cross Comparison
- Developed Initial Coding Framework on DeDoose

### Final Analysis
- Visual Mind Mapping of Interrelationships, Connections, and Patterns between all transcripts
- Refined Final Coding Framework
Figure 3
Major Findings and Subthemes

CLASSROOM CULTIVATION AND COMPLICATIONS
- Embodied Classroom Practice
- Identity in Relation to Current Reform Initiatives

EXPOSING AND REFRAMING WITH COLLEAGUES AND PARENTS
- Tactics: Picking your battles & Working the cracks
- Talking back without assurance

STAYING TRUE TO YOURSELF
- Support systems including role of administrators
- Leaving the profession
http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/equality-is-not-enough/
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ACADEMIC PREPARATION

**PhD in Teaching and Leadership, Special Education**
School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Dissertation topic: “Negotiating DSE teaching identity in today’s public schools: Complexity, camaraderie, & subversion”
Advisor: Christine Ashby, PhD
Anticipated December 2015

**Masters of Science Degree in Cultural Foundations of Education**
School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
May 2011

**Certificate in Advanced Study in Disability Studies**
School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
May 2011

**Bachelor of Arts in History, Adolescent and Special Education**
Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY
May 2006

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University Teaching
SUNY College at Cortland
**Assistant Professor**

- FSA 380: Perspectives on Disability: The Child, Family, & Community (Fall 2015)
- FSA 683: Administration of Special Education (Fall 2015)
- FSA 420: Inclusive Field Experience Seminar (Fall 2015)

Syracuse University
**Instructor**

- SPE 311: Perspectives on Disability (Summer 2015)
- SPE 615: Seminar in Secondary Special Education Teaching (Fall 2013; Spring, 2013; Fall 2014)
- SPE 612: Adapting Instruction for Diverse Student Needs (Spring 2014)
- EDU 203: Introduction to Inclusive Schooling (Spring 2012)

Teaching Assistant

- SPE 324: Differentiation for Inclusive Schooling (Fall 2014)
- CFE/DSP 614: Critical Issues in Dis/ability & Inclusion (Summer 2012)
- EDU 203: Introduction to Inclusive Schooling, Syracuse University (Fall 2011)
Harvard University  
_Teaching Fellow_

- T-210Z2: Dimensions of Diversity: Special Education (Summer 2013)

Public School Teaching

_Special Education Teacher_  
Henninger High School, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY  
2007-2009

_Special Education Teacher_  
G. Ray Bodley High School, Fulton City Schools, Fulton, NY  
2006-2007

_Rookie Teacher of the Year Award_

_Special Education Teacher_  
East Syracuse Minoa High School, East Syracuse, NY  
Summer 2006

TEACHING CREDENTIALS

Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program  
2012, 2013, 2014

- Certificate in University Teaching

Professional New York State Certification in Adolescent Special Education, grades 7-12  
Professional New York State Certification in Adolescent Social Studies, grades 7-12

SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH AND SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE

_School Site Liaison Intern_  
Syracuse Urban Inclusive Teacher Residency, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
2012-2015

- Provided ongoing support, evaluation and assistance to university faculty, school staff, and graduate students around research, teaching, coursework and alignment to grant  
- Developed and conducted research projects  
- Supervised three cohorts of 18 student teachers in 7-12 Special Education masters program

_Research Apprenticeship_  
Inclusive Teacher Preparation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
2012-2013

- Conducted qualitative research, employing interviews and participant observation to understand the experiences of pre-service teachers of enacting inclusive pedagogical practices when entering student teaching.

_Director of Internal Support_  
Nottingham Early College High School, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY  
2011-2012
• Assisted in the management and development of Early College study and support, family events, study festivals, recruitment and college visits
• Developed quantitative measures to support assessment of student growth and efficacy for summer research initiatives

**PUBLICATIONS**


**Manuscripts in review**


**In Preparation**


**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS (REFEREED)**

**National**


**Local**


**GRANT FUNDED EXPERIENCE**

Ashby, C. E. & Smith, C. Co-Principal Investigators (2012-2014). Syracuse University Urban Inclusive Teacher Residency. New York State Education Department Race to the Top. (Research Assistant)


Travel Grant, Graduate Student Organization Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (Fall 2014)

**EDUCATION RELATED EXPERIENCE & CONSULTANCIES**

**Professional Development** 2013- 2015

Ed Smith K-8 School, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY

- Facilitated special education service delivery audit, recommendations, and next steps for inclusive planning and programming with Christine Ashby, PhD
• Conducted focus groups with participants (e.g., special educators, administrators) to visually map their current service delivery model

**Educational Consultant**  
Shaker High School, North Colonie School District, Latham, NY  
2012-2014

• Facilitated Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) for a transition-aged student, while advising and training staff on person-centered planning, self-determination and inclusive service delivery

**Independent Educational Evaluator**  
Friends Central Schools, Philadelphia, PA & Episcopal Academy, Newtown, PA  
February 2013; November 2013

• Evaluation and development of improvement and recommendation plan of two elite private school’s Department of Student Support Services, qualitative methods including participant-observation, interviewing, and focus groups

**PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

TASH (formally The Association for People with Severe Disabilities), member

Society for Disability Studies, member

American Education Research Association, member; Division K: Teacher and Teacher Education & Disability Studies in Education SIG