Pockets of Promise: A Phenomenological Study of Experienced Special Education Teachers Working With Students With Emotional Disturbance in an Alternative Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand, from the perspective of experienced Special Education Teachers, successful practices and barriers in meeting the needs of students with emotional disturbance (ED) in Special Education Alternative programs. The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding, from the lived experiences of special education teachers, the critical elements required for comprehensive instructional and social-emotional learning (SEL) supports and services in meeting the diverse needs of ED students. Additionally, this research was conducted to gain insight into the barriers and systematic challenges in fulfilling the school’s original intention of transitioning students to less restrictive educational settings once they are placed. Phenomenological interviews focused on the research questions revealed an expanded need for district level support, on-going professional development, and comprehensive Special Education Alternative program planning.

Keywords: alternative program, disproportionality, marginalized, overrepresentation, student outcomes, segregated settings
Pockets of Promise: A Phenomenological Study of Experienced Special Education Teachers Working with Students with Emotional Disturbance in an Alternative Program

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

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Dedication

I dedicate this book in memory of my parents, Suzanne and Lefty. Their hard work, dedication, and nurturing provided the foundation and opportunity for their five children to be the first generation to attend college. Their love and guidance removed any obstacles in our path.
Acknowledgement

There are many people that have guided me along the way on this journey. First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my dissertation advisor and chair, Dr. Beth Ferri. I have long admired Dr. Ferri’s work and contributions within the field of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies and was honored to have her serve as my chair. Words cannot express how grateful I am to have her tutelage and insight along the way. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Joseph B. Shedd. As a former student I can say with confidence that his teachings shaped the administrator that I am today and my approach to educational leadership in 21st Century Schools. Dr. White’s insight into special education policy and social justice provided invaluable perspective throughout my research. I am grateful to my dissertation committee and their thoughtful reflection and direction throughout.

All my diverse learning experiences at Syracuse University have provided a theoretical perspective to frame this study. Dr. George Theoharis consistently posed this question, “Is this the world we want to live in?” To consistently ask yourself that question forces you to look at the current condition of education and challenge why we are not working towards a more inclusive and just society. Dr. Doug Biklen provided me with the foundation of inclusive education and the framework for presuming competence. Dr. Steven Taylor provided me with the historical context of the history of disability and social justice.
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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Research

School districts across the United States are finding it difficult to meet the needs of students labeled with emotional disturbance (ED), particularly those who exhibit serious social, emotional and behavioral challenges. These challenges can cut across disciplinary, instructional, and interpersonal contexts and school districts are often ill prepared to meet student needs (Gresham, 2005). As a result, school districts are placing increasing number of students in more restrictive educational settings. The more time a student spends away from non-disabled peers, the more restrictive the environment is considered to be. Current educational research data has shown that students who are taught in an integrated setting with typical peers demonstrate better academic progress than students taught in segregated settings (Biklen, 2020).

Some would argue that the continuum of placements is in place to keep students with disabilities and minoritized students out of general education settings and to justify segregating them in the most restrictive settings (Ferri & Connor, 2005). The disproportionate placement of minority students in special education continues to be a central problem in the field. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021):

In 2018, the most prevalent disability category of student’s ages 6 through 21 served under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), Part B, was specific learning disability (specifically, 2,337,739 or 37.7 percent, of the 6,315, 228 students 6 through 21 under IDEA, Part B). The next most common disability category was speech or language impairment (16.4 percent), followed by other health impairment (16.2 percent), autism
Black or African American students were more likely to be served under IDEA Part B than were students ages 6 through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined for the following disability categories: autism, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, other health impairment, specific learning disability, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Students with ED are also less likely to be included in general education settings less than youth with other disabilities (Lehr & McComas, 2005).

Research supports that students with disabilities benefit academically and socially emotionally from inclusive vs segregated educational settings. Causton, Macleod and Theoharis (2020), argue that students with disabilities who are educated in general education settings tend to do better both cognitively and socially than similar peers placed in segregated settings. According to Biklen (2020), “nothing happens in a separate school or classroom that cannot be supported in an inclusive school or classroom” (p. 244). Despite research supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities in inclusive settings subgroups of students continue to be removed from inclusive educational settings and placed in segregated settings away from typical peers. The National Council on Disability (2018) states that:

students with disabilities, in particular students of color and students in urban settings, as well as students with specific disability labels continue to be removed from general education, instructional, and social opportunities and to be segregated disproportionately when compared to White students who live in suburban and rural areas and those who have less intensive academic support needs. (p. 9)
According to IDEA students with disabilities are students who have been identified by the Committee of Special Education as having one of 13 federally defined disability categories, which include ED. According to the Federal Regulations for IDEA (2006), an ED is a condition that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or other health factors, but still hinders a student’s ability to learn (§300.8[4][i][A]). Students with ED may struggle building interpersonal relationships, perform appropriate behaviors under typical circumstances, encounter pervasive depression or unhappiness, and/or develop physical symptoms or fears related to personal or school-based problems (Assistance to States, 2006). These characteristics must present over a long period of time and have a direct negative impact on a students’ school performance.

Students labeled with ED represent a wide range of severity and intensity of symptoms.

It is important to note that prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, school districts could exclude students with ED from attending public school. School districts had great leeway in defining whether a student was “educable” prior to this landmark legislation. Despite assurances under IDEA, students with ED label continue to experience some of the worst academic and discipline related outcomes, including low graduation rates and high rates of harsh disciplinary sanctions (Buchanan, Clark & Neese, 2016). Moreover, school districts across the United States over rely upon segregated alternative program settings to educate students with ED. However, this practice directly conflicts with the body of research that “demonstrates that inclusive education results in the best learning outcomes, there is no research that supports the value of segregated special education class and school” (National Council on Disability, 2018, p. 9).

The term alternative school and program are often used interchangeably, although there are technical differences in the target population, setting, services, and structure of programming.
States and/or local school systems often have the option to designate alternative education as schools or programs, depending on whether student measures such as enrollment, attendance, academic progress, graduation rates, and other metrics are quantified and separate from or within the metrics of traditional schools (Porowski, O’Connor & Luo, 2014). There are approximately 10,000 alternative schools and programs in the U.S., a little over 5,000 alternative schools (Momentum, 2018) and approximately 5,000 alternative programs (Addis et al., 2020).

Throughout the study I will be using the term “alternative program” to refer to the setting of this study. This alternative program serves students with IEP’s classified as ED who have intensive instructional and management needs. Students in this program are working toward mastering grade level learning standards and developing prosocial self-regulation strategies with accommodations prescribed on their IEP. Students in this setting have a home school within this large urban district assigned to them for accountability reporting.

**Background of the Problem**

Educators have long grappled with identifying why some students fail to thrive in a traditional school system. Although students with disabilities now have more school-based special education supports and services, students with ED have experienced fewer positive outcomes than most other disability groups (Buchanan et al., 2016). According to the Office of Special Education Programs, in 2017 – 2018, “Black or African American with disabilities, ages 14-21, exiting school were more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate with a regular high school diploma than all students with disabilities” (U.S. Department of Education, ED Facts Data Warehouse, 2020, para. 5).

Despite alternative programs growing numbers, limited research has been conducted on the instructional programming, entrance and exit criteria, and the special education teachers who
teach at these settings. Research on alternative programs for students with ED is limited and there is no single commonly accepted definition or common understanding of what constitutes effective practice in terms of either academic and or social emotional programming for students placed in these settings. In reviewing current literature, Lange & Sletten (2002), found that alternative programs share common characteristics, such as small enrollment, supportive environments, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, flexibility in programming, opportunities for planning curriculum relevant to student interests, and an emphasis on student decision-making.

As alternative education continues to evolve and play a more prominent role in response to a host of educational, political, economic, and social forces, the need for information about these settings and the students they serve grows (Lehr & Lange, 2003). My hope is that this research will contribute to identifying evidence-based pedagogical practices that public schools and districts can implement to include students with disabilities in less restrictive settings and eliminate the need for disproportionate removal of minoritized students to segregated settings like alternative programs.

Problem Statement

There is little available research on the educational outcomes for students with ED in alternative programs. We do know that students with ED once placed in alternative programs are less likely to transition to a less restrictive classroom setting once placed (Hoge & Avila, 2014). Separate programs for students with behavioral challenges blame the student and often place the burden on students to “earn” access to inclusive educational opportunities through demonstration of specific behavior and conduct (Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014). Discriminatory practices like placing students in segregated settings like alternative programs places the burden
on students to develop normative behavior and skills in a non-normative setting rather than placing the burden on educators to devise appropriate interventions. (National Council on Disability, 2018). According to the National Council on Disability (2018):

research consistently paints a picture that depicts students with disabilities who are educated in segregated special education placements as receiving less instruction, having fewer opportunities to learn, and fewer opportunities to use knowledge and skills during instruction and other meaningful activities. (p. 40)

Ferri and Connor (2005), note that “attitudes about race, culture, and poverty often influence the over-identification of minority students in special education. Disability has become a more socially accepted, even normalized, category of marginalization for students of color” (p. 454). By segregating students in alternative programs rather than trying to engage students with instructional strategies, supports and modifications in LRE, are we denying students access to equal educational opportunities?

Educational reform efforts are targeted at increasing accountability for student learning and improved student performance on state assessments for all students, especially those at-risk for educational failure. The well documented “achievement gap” between African Americans and other students is a persistent problem. The achievement gap can be defined as a statistically significant difference in achievement between groups of students on a particular measure or set of measures (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). One of the goals of educational reform is increased accountability for student learning through regular high-stakes assessments. The continuum of school placements exists to ensure that students with disabilities have the most appropriate and least restrictive educational setting to be educated successfully.
As school districts continue to rely on more restrictive educational placements for students with ED, there is a need for more targeted investigations into the variables considered when determining alternative programs and the elements required for comprehensive programming and opportunities for transitioning back to less restrictive settings. Despite the existence of studies examining the attitudes or perceptions of special education teachers, few studies have focused on teachers working in special education alternative schools, especially schools serving students with ED (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

The goal of this study is to explore and understand, from the perspective of certified special education teachers, the elements required for comprehensive and effective alternative programming for students with ED who are placed in these settings. Furthermore, understanding the role these schools have in the education of students identified as having an ED will enhance services and help to facilitate successful school outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Purpose and Significance of the Problem Researched**

The purpose and the potential significance of this study was to investigate, from the perspective of special education teachers working in an alternative program for students with ED the characteristics of high leverage practices. The research provides insight into the lived experiences of special education teachers working with students with ED at an alternative program in an urban district and their perspectives on schools’ ability to meet the original intention of preparing students to transition to a less restrictive educational setting once placed. Semi-structured in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with special education teachers to identify, from their perspective, schools’ ability to provide supports and services required to effectively meet the diverse, ever-changing needs of students with ED removed from
traditional school settings. In addition, phenomenological interviews will provide insight into successful practices and barriers to success.

**Theoretical Rational**

This study aims to: (a) develop a deeper understanding, from the perspective of special education teachers, effective pedagogical practices when working with students with ED; (b) understand the obstacles and barriers that special education teachers face when implementing the goals of the program as outlined in their mission and vision, and; (c) consider how a theoretical framework of Disability Studies Critical Race (DisCrit) can be used to envision alternative education programs through a social justice lens.

The theoretical framework for this study will be grounded in DisCrit focusing on ways in which race and dis/ability factors into the segregation of minoritized students with ED in alternative programs. According to Annamma, Connor & Ferri (2013), “DisCrit explores the ways in which both race and ability are socially constructed and interdependent” (p. 5). In framing this study, I drew on DisCrit “to examine the processes in which students are simultaneously raced and disabled” (p. 5) leading to their placement in and experiences with alternative programs. According to Annamma et al. (2013):

> given the racial gap in graduation, incidents of discipline, and incarceration rates, along with vast over-representation of students of color in special education and the lackluster achievement rates within many of these special education programs, we must critically examine why so many students labeled with a dis/ability, particularly students of color, are either experiencing failure or being perceived as failing and on what grounds”. (p.6)

As an educator working with disenfranchised students, it is impossible not to acknowledge how race and disability intersect throughout their education. The tenets of DisCrit can help to
understand or explain how race and dis/ability are co-constructed in the placement of minoritized students with ED in alternative programs. Connor, Annamma & Ferri (2016), offer a theoretical framework for disconcerting issues at the intersection of race and dis/ability within our public-school systems that have continued to marginalize subgroups of students. Specifically:

1) DisCrit focuses on ways that forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways to uphold notions of normalcy.

2) DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality and so on.

3) DisCrit emphasizes the social construction of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.

4) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.

5) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.

6) DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.

7) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. (p. 19)

Drawing on tenet one of DisCrit, the authors discuss the ways in which racism and ableism have been shaped by the dominant culture to reinforce the perception of normalcy in our educational system has contributed to the marginalization of students of color (2016). According to Connor et al. (2016) “these mutually constitutive processes are enacted through normalizing
practices such as labeling a student ‘at risk’ for simply being a person of color, thereby reinforcing the unmarked norm of Whiteness, and signaling to many that the student is not capable in body and mind” (p.19). Interviews with seven special education teachers at an alternative program in a large urban district will provide insight into how race and disability are co-constructed within a public-school system and how these forces contribute to a deficit model of thinking and the placement of minoritized students with ED in the most segregated setting in this district.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and to understand the critical elements required to meet the needs of students with ED, from the perspective of certified special education teachers in an alternative program in a large urban district in New York State. The area of research is important from the viewpoint of teachers who work at these settings, because they are immersed with their students daily and, many times, are in the best position to determine the level and types of supports and services students need (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010). Interview data also examined teacher’s views on forces of ableism and racism that position students as “needing” to be in an alternative program or perhaps not a “good fit” for transitioning back to a less restrictive setting.

This qualitative phenomenological study, aimed to add to the body of knowledge around the elements required to provide effective, high leverage practices to promote academic achievement and behavioral gains for students with ED while preparing to transition to a less restrictive educational setting. In addition, special education teachers were queried to identify challenges related to implementation of IEPs and transition plans. My hope is that this research will provide insight into pedagogical practices deemed effective from special education teachers
working with students with ED, thus ultimately reducing the need for the most restrictive educational settings segregated from their typical peers.

**Research Questions**

According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), research questions are interrogative statements that narrow the statement of purpose to specific questions. According to Brinkmann & Kvale, (2015), “a phenomenological approach seeks to understand social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (p. 30). The following research questions guided this phenomenological study, particularly the semi-structured interviews that were designed to obtain practical information from seven Certified Special Education teachers in an alternative program in New York State:

a. what constitutes success for students with emotional disturbance placed in alternative programs?

b. what are the elements associated with successful transition into a less restrictive educational setting?

c. what are the challenges and barriers to successful implementation of the identified elements in research questions 1 and 2?

It is my hope that the research questions will assist in identifying high leverage practices that can become powerful tools to improve student outcomes and advance educator preparation and practice. The significance of this qualitative descriptive study will add to the body of research on the elements required to provide comprehensive instructional and social, emotional programming for students with ED while placed in an alternative program and
when preparing students to transition to a less restrictive educational setting from the perspective of special education teachers.

**Potential Significance of the Study**

The potential significance of this qualitative study is to contribute to the limited research on the critical elements required to meet the diverse needs of the students placed in the most restrictive setting in this district. I hope to provide the reader with an increased awareness of the challenges when planning, developing, and implementing programming for students placed in segregated settings. In addition, high impact practices may be identified which may further translate into effective programming throughout a student’s placement as well as preparation for transitioning back to a less restrictive educational setting. Finally, this research may contribute to identification of best practices that are transferable to inclusive settings, thus eliminating the need for more segregated placements.

**Definition of Terms**

*Alternative School/Program:* New York State Education Department defines alternative program as one that “includes any nontraditional environment that provides a comprehensive elementary, middle or secondary curriculum. Mastery of learning standards and attainment of a high school diploma are achieved through a learner-centered program structure, multiple learning opportunities, frequent student performance review and feedback, and innovative use of community and school resources to support youth development” (NYSED.Gov, 2010).

*Dis/ability:* Connor and Ferri (2016), use the word dis/ability to “1: counter the emphasis on having a whole person be represented by what he or she cannot do, rather than what he or she can, and 2: disrupt notions of the fixity and permanency of the concept of disability, seeking rather to analyze the entire context in which a person functions” (p. 1).
Disproportionality: Disproportionality is defined as the “overrepresentation” and “underrepresentation” of a population or demographic group in special or gifted education programs relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population (National Education Association, 2007).

Emotional Disturbance: IDEA defines ED as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (c) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and (d) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. Throughout the literature review there were many interchangeable terms used to describe students with emotional disturbance. For example, emotional and behavioral disorder, emotional impairment, emotional disability, emotional disorder, mental illness, mental disorder, and behavioral disability. IDEA recognizes the term emotional disturbance (IDEA, 2019).


Homebound/Hospital: A category that includes students with disabilities who receive special education and related services in hospital programs or homebound programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).
**Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** The individualized Education Program, or IEP, is the key document developed by the parent and his or her child’s teachers and related services personnel that lays out how the child receives a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Among other components, the IEP lays out the child’s academic achievement and functional performance, describes how the child will be included in the general education curriculum, establishes annual goals for the child and describes how those goals will be measured, states what special education and related services are needed by the child, describes how the child will be appropriately assessed including through the use of alternative assessments, and determines what accommodations may be appropriate for the child’s instruction and assessments. (IDEA, 2004).

**Interim Alternative Educational Setting:** An appropriate setting determined by the child’s IEP team or a hearing officer in which the child is placed for no more than 45 school days. This setting enables the child to continue to receive educational services and participate in the general education curriculum (although in another setting) and to progress toward meeting the goals set out in the IEP. As appropriate, the setting includes a functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention services and modifications to address the behavior violation so that it does not recur (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** LRE means that a student who has a disability should have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the maximum extent appropriate. They should have access to the general education curriculum, or any other program that non-disabled peers would be able to access. The student should be provided with supplementary aids and services necessary to achieve educational goals if placed in a setting with non-disabled peers. When IDEA was originally enacted in 1975, Congress recognized that many
children with disabilities were unnecessarily separated from their peers and educated in alternative environments. Therefore, IDEA requires that states provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The general goal is to allow children with disabilities to be educated with their peers in the regular classroom to the extent possible. IDEA recognizes that there is an array of placements that meet the general requirements of providing FAPE in the least restrictive environment. LRE may change from child to child, school to school, and district to district. In developing the IEP, parents and the local educational agency are empowered to reach appropriate decisions about what constitutes LRE for the individual child, including placements that may be restrictive in order to maximize the child’s benefit from special education and related services (Assistance to States, 2006; IDEA, 2004).

Minoritized Group: A social group that is devalued in society and given less access to its resources. This devaluing encompasses how the group is represented, what degree of access to resources it is granted, and how the unequal access is rationalized. Traditionally, a group in this position has been referred to as the minority group. However, this language has been replaced with the term minoritized in order to capture the active dynamics that create the lower status in society, and to signal that a groups’ status is not necessarily related to how many or few of them there are in the population at large (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): Is a framework that assists educators provide both academic and behavioral strategies for students with diverse needs. MTSS grew out of the integration of two other intervention-based frameworks: Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS). As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) updated by Congress in 2004, the Response to Intervention model of
assessment originally sought to identify students who would benefit from more intensive supports. From these beginnings as a tool to help improve educational outcomes for students in special education. MTSS has grown to encompass all students at every level (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, 2022).

*Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS)*: is an evidence-based three-tiered framework for improving and integrating all of the data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes every day. It is a way to support everyone – especially students with disabilities – to create the kinds of schools where all students are successful. PBIS isn’t a curriculum you purchase or something you learn during a one-day professional development training. It is a commitment to addressing student behavior through systems change. When it’s implemented well, students achieve improved social and academic outcomes, schools experience reduced exclusionary discipline practices, and school personnel feel more effective (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, 2022).

*Public Charter School*: A school providing free public elementary and/or secondary education to eligible students under a specific charter granted by the state legislature or other authority and designated by such authority to be a charter school (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

*Response to Intervention (RTI)*: is a three-tiered system for supporting the academic achievement of students not making expected progress. RTI is a framework for intervention and prevention that focuses on the collection of data to identify students’ instructional needs, providing appropriate interventions within a MTSS and monitoring progress over time to make ongoing adjustments to student supports and services (Jung, Frey, Fisher, & Kroener, 2019).
School-to-Prison Pipeline: The “school-to-prison pipeline” is an emerging trend that pushes large numbers of at-risk youth—particularly children of color—out of classrooms and into the juvenile justice system. The policies and practices that contribute to this trend be a pipeline with many entry points, from under-resourced K-12 public schools to the over-use of zero-tolerance suspensions and expulsions and to the explosion of policing and arrests in public schools. The confluence of these practices threatens to prepare an entire generation of children for a future of incarceration. A phenomenon that is commonly thought of as the policies, processes, and practices that push students out of school and into prisons (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010, Annamma et al., 2018).

Separate School and Residential Facility: Are settings along the continuum of alternative placements that include students with disabilities who receive special education and related services, at public expense, for greater than 50 percent of the school day in public or private separate day schools or residential facilities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities are defined as those who have been identified as such by the Committee on Special Education and are receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students with disabilities include those having an intellectual disability; hearing impairment, including deafness; speech or language impairment; visual impairment, including blindness; serious emotional disturbance; orthopedic impairment; autism; traumatic brain injury; developmental delay; other health impairment; specific learning disability; deaf-blindness; or multiple disabilities and who, by reason thereof, receive special education and related services under the IDEA according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (IDEA, 2004).

Assumptions of the Study
I approached the study with several assumptions about the participants and related stakeholders. I assumed special education teachers would have some basic knowledge about special education law, the continuum of alternative placements and transition requirements for students that they work with. However, I did believe that teachers may have less knowledge of educational outcomes for minoritized students in alternative programs.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One provides an overview of the problem and the lack of available research from the perspective of certified special education teachers at an alternative program for students with ED. This chapter also included the purpose of this study, which is to better understand the elements required to meet the needs of students with ED in alternative programs and the barriers to returning to a less restrictive setting once placed.

Chapter Two provides further insight into this problem through a review of empirical literature on the topic. Following the review of the literature, research design and methodology will be discussed in Chapter Three. The results of the research will be disseminated in Chapter Four, Five and Six. Chapter Seven will provide a discussion of the findings and recommendations based on the analysis of the data collected.
Chapter 2

Students with ED and Alternative Programs: An Overview of the Literature

There is substantial research on the overrepresentation of students with ED placed in segregated educational settlings like alternative programs. Students with disabilities are among those most at risk of academic failure and dropping out of school. Out of the 13 disability categories, students with ED have the lowest academic success rate (Kumm, Wilkinson & McDaniels, 2020). Traditional school settings that struggle with systems capacity and equitable educational practices continue to perpetuate the segregation of students in high incidence categories like ED. As a result, alternative programs have emerged as one educational response for students with ED who are deemed too difficult to educate in a traditional school setting. Research conducted by Lehr and Lange (2003), found that 12% of students placed in alternative programs are students with disabilities, yet little is known about the instructional practices, special education teachers who teach at these settings and student outcomes.

Though alternative programs have been in existence for many years, there is very little student level data related to the efficacy or function of these settings, yet many educators believe that alternative settings are an effective option for meeting the needs of students with ED (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Alternatively, others maintain that, the restrictiveness of placements for students with ED, which serve primarily minoritized students, represents the intersections of racism and ableism that continue to shape teacher perceptions of students, as well as to help to lay bare unexamined cultural norms that contribute to minoritized students being viewed from a deficit lens. They argue that educators that engage in a deficit discourse perpetuate the labeling of students as deficient instead of focusing on how to create engaging learning environments and effective pedagogical practices to reach more students.
The goal of this study is to add to the body of knowledge from the perspective of special education teachers working with students with ED in an alternative program. Additionally, phenomenological interviews will provide insight into effective pedagogical practices and barriers to success to support students with ED in ways that may assist in eliminating the need for these segregated alternative program placements. My hope is that this research will assist in enhancing high leverage practices to facilitate successful student outcomes and determine effective instructional supports and services for students with ED, which may translate to reducing overrepresentation and educating students in less restrictive educational settings.

**Search Process**

The search strategy for this research started with identifying key words to search data bases for relevant literature. Keywords included but were not limited to alternative programs, student outcomes, disproportionality, equity, minoritized, emotional disturbance, social justice, and special education teachers at alternative programs. The ProQuest, ERIC, and EBSCOHOST databased; Syracuse University Summon Search; and Google scholar were used to search for literature related to this topic. Sources of information included books, government reports, peer reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and interviews. Older sources were included to provide the reader a perspective of the history of equitable access to educational opportunities for minoritized students. Most sources of information used for this study were published within the last ten years.

To get a better understanding of the scope of the problem and possible recommendations, this chapter will review empirical studies that have examined alternative educational programs and the students who are most likely to be placed in these settings. What we do know from the review of the literature is that students of color are overrepresented in special education
categories such as ED and are more likely to be placed in more restrictive educational settings than their white peers (Mahon-Reynolds & Parker, 2016). Once placed in more restrictive, segregated settings students are less likely to transition to less restrictive educational settings (Wilkinson, Kumm & McDaniel, 2020).

The theoretical model of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) or DisCrit informs this study. Specifically, DisCrit provided an understanding of educational inequities and how the intersection of race and disability factors into the marginalization of students and placement in these settings. Therefore, the focus of this literature review will provide background for the problem being studied by reviewing: (a) placement considerations for students classified as ED; (b) students placed in alternative programs and student outcomes; (c) teachers at alternative programs; and, (d) high leverage practices and challenges in alternative programs.

**Students Placed in Alternative Programs**

Porowski et al. (2014) found that the definition of alternative education is vague, allowing states and school districts to define programming for students they serve. Individual states structure and run alternative education differently and program emphasis can vary depending upon “whom the program serves, where the program operates, what the program offers and how the program is structured” (Porowski et al., 2014, p. 2). New York State Education Department defines an alternative program as one that:

- includes any nontraditional environment that provides a comprehensive elementary, middle, or secondary curriculum. Mastery of learning standards and attainment of a high school diploma are achieved through a learner-centered program structure, multiple learning opportunities, frequent student performance review and feedback, and
innovative use of community and school resources to support youth development.

(NYSED.Gov., 2010, para. 3)

Alternative programs are designed to serve students with a variety of diverse academic and/or social emotional needs. There are numerous pathways in which students can be placed in alternative programs. According to Kumm et al., (2020), “there four main avenues through which students may experience a change in their educational placement: (a) individualized education program (IEP) team decision; (b) family, mental health expert, or other referral; (c) expulsion from general education setting; and (d) legal decision” (p. 2). All the students at this alternative program in which this study was conducted were placed by the IEP team decision process.

Public schools are mandated by federal law to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate. In addition, placement of students with disabilities in special classes, separate schools, or other forms of removal from the regular educational environment should occur only when the disability is such that even with the use of supplementary aids and services, education cannot be satisfactorily achieved (IDEA, 2004). A student’s IEP team should be working collaboratively to determine what constitutes an appropriate instructional and social emotional supports and services, not a location or what pre-existing classroom setting fits best. The team should review the continuum of placement options from least restrictive to most restrictive, beginning with the general education classroom.

Public school accountability is a critical step in addressing the educational achievement gap that plagues our most vulnerable students. For too long, students with disabilities and minoritized students’ poor achievement have been under reported by school districts due to lack of accountability for reporting student progress. The U.S. Department of Education requires that
states collect data on the amount of time students with IEPs are educated in classes with their typical peers. Students’ educational placements are then categorized as included in general education classrooms for 80 percent or more of the day (full-inclusion placement), included 40–79 percent of the day (partial inclusion placement), or included less than 40 percent of the day (substantially separate placement) (Grindal, Schifter, Schwartz & Hehir, 2019).

The continuum of placements for students with disabilities and the pathway through the special education process is in place to assist in promoting an education in the LRE. School districts rely on an array of settings inside and outside the general education classroom to provide instructional supports and services to address the individual needs outlined on a student’s IEP. As noted by Gliona, Gonzales and Jacobsen (2005), “the continuum may include special education consultation within regular education classrooms, a mix of resource and regular education classrooms, resource classes, special classes within a school, special day schools, home-based schooling, residential schools, or hospital schooling” (p. 218).

According to the 42nd Annual Report to Congress (2021), Black or African American students ages 6 through 21 were twice as likely to receive special education services for ED when compared to all other racial/ethnic groups combined. According to Addis et al., (2020), “for a variety of reasons, many alternative schools and programs serve disproportionately high numbers of students of color, students of poverty, students with disabilities, and males” (p.4). Kumm et al. (2020), found that students with ED who demonstrate behavioral challenges that schools, or districts find too difficult to manage in a typical school setting are increasingly being placed in alternative educational settings like alternative programs. In a study of Alternative Education, Aron (2006), found the difficulties involved in counting (or estimating) the number of alternative education opportunities points to the need to develop a system for characterizing
these programs. Although the definition of alternative program is vague, we do know that the outcomes for students in alternative programs serving students with ED varies widely in terms of positive school outcomes (Hoge & Avila, 2014).

**Student Outcomes**

The intersection of race and disability often times presents different outcomes for white students and students of color when considering identification and placement of students with disabilities (Connor et al., 2016). Students of color are more likely to be educated in a more restrictive setting and less likely to transition to a LRE once placed; while, White students are more likely to be educated in a general education setting with support services (Hoge & Avila, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, EDFacts Data Warehouse, (2020), “in school year 2018-19, when compared to all students with disabilities, Black or African American students were more likely to be identified with ED and educated in a segregated setting” (p. 3). In a study of the Segregation of Students with Disabilities it was found that “segregated special education placements offer less instruction, have fewer opportunities to learn, and fewer opportunities to use knowledge and skills during instruction and other meaningful activities” (National Council on Disability, 2018, p. 45).

A study conducted by Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins & Varjas (2016), found that students in alternative programs lack access to evidence-base instruction and opportunities for inclusive academic, social, and extracurricular experiences. Freeman, Yell, and Shriner (2018), point out that students with ED “lag behind their peers academically and behaviorally, are likely to be excluded from school, drop out more frequently, and face higher incarceration rates and a host of other negative outcomes as adults” (p. 97). Academic outcomes for students in alternative programs “compared to peers in traditional schools include less credits earned, decreased
attendance, lower scores on standardized math and literacy assessments, and increased dropout rates” (Perzigian, 2018, p. 3). Students with ED were also subject to higher rates of suspension and disciplinary removal when compared to their peers in other disability categories. According to Adams and Erevelles (2016):

> Through the use of “zero-tolerance” policies, schools have created institutions that police students through the surveillance of behavior and a hyper-vigilance directed toward students marked as both raced and disabled, resulting in their overrepresentation in office discipline referrals, suspensions, segregated classrooms, alternative schools, and ultimately incarceration. (p. 137)

In the study “Out of Sight, Out of Mind”, Hoge & Avila (2014), found that an (alternative program) was often presented by other schools within the district as a consequence or punishment for students, rather than not an educational accommodation to meet their specific needs. The school psychologist shared that “… you will have specific administrators at other schools use us as a threat, to say to the student that ‘if you don’t stop whatever behavior, you will be going to Hinton” (p. 306).

According to Annamma et al. (2013), “historical inequalities in the education system—segregated education, concentrated poverty, and longstanding stereotypes—influence how school officials and law enforcement both label children and treat students who present challenging behavior. Studies show that students of color receive harsher punishments for engaging in the same conduct as white students” (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2018). According to Kim et al. (2010):

> studies show that students of color are consistently overrepresented at every point of the school-to-prison pipeline, from enrollment in under resourced public schools to
suspension and expulsion rates to referrals to disciplinary alternative schools to referrals to law enforcement and the juvenile justice system. (p. 34)

According to Ben-Moshe & Magana (2014), “the connection between race, gender, disability, class, and other factors in creating and reproducing inequalities in the field of special education has led to a call to connect these issues in a more methodical and critical way (107). The authors suggest that we must look to the institutional factors in education that may affect the ways students are steered towards particular outcomes, like overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Ben-Moshe & Magana, 2014). Singular notions of identity markers such as race and dis/ability have perpetuated over-representation of disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions of multiply minoritized students. Singular notions of identity are problematic encouraging teachers to view students who are outside of the normative culture to be viewed as deficient. Fergus (2016) states that “to understand the continuous pattern of disproportionality in special education and behavioral referrals, we need to identify the beliefs and constructs about race and cultural difference that exist in schools” (p. 119).

**How Students with Emotional Disturbance are Placed: Entrance, Exit, Transition**

It could be argued that inclusion is the single most contentious issue in special education. According to Landrum, Cook and Tankersley (2019), “the problem may be even more challenging with regard to students with ED, who are typically served in more restrictive settings than students with other disabilities” (p. 4). Review of the literature reveals that student enrollment in alternative programs is highly fluid, students are removed from and returned to less restrictive settings on an individual basis for a variety of reasons (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002). Decisions regarding how students are placed in alternative settings lacks examination (Hoge et al., 2014). Determining where students fit best along the continuum of placements and how to
best support them in a typical classroom has been met with considerable challenges from teachers and administrators in LRE. As we know, students with ED experience some of the poorest educational outcomes and are placed in alternative programs more frequently than their peers in other disability categories (Wilkinson, et al., 2020). The need to implement high leverage practices in typical classroom settings is necessary to successfully engage students with ED and reduce disproportionate overrepresentation and placement in segregated alternative programs (National Council on Disability, 2018).

Although alternative programs account for the variety of settings along the continuum to educate students with ED, no clear rationale exists as to how these students should move from setting to setting (Hoge et al., 2014). In a study of Future Directions for Research to Improve Outcomes for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Thompson, Keller-Allen, Tuuvesson & Li (2017), found that “schools tend to be reactive rather than proactive toward students with EBD” (p. 8). Children with intense behavior problems, particular secondary-aged students, are often transferred to alternative settings that have teachers skilled in dealing with emotional and behavioral issues” (Thompson et al., 2017, p. 7). Additionally, teachers working with students with ED believed that some student behavior was intentional and did not feel equipped to meet the behavioral challenges associated with ED related classification (Thompson et al., 2017). It was recommended that all staff working with students with ED would benefit from on-going professional development on understanding ED, social emotional behavioral and curricular supports (Thompson et al., 2017).

In a mixed methods study examining placement considerations for students with ED across three alternative settings, Hoge et al., (2014), found that aggression (86% across all settings) was the primary reason identified by participants for referral and placement of students
with ED in alternative programs. The population of students in the three alternative settings served students classified as ED and received special education services. Participants were asked open-ended questions to provide insight into each schools’ approach educating students with ED; how placement decisions were made; how exit criteria were determined; and reasons why students did not transition out. Findings showed similar answers across all three schools:

a) limited transitioning of students back to less restrictive settings, b) greater number of factors considered during exit decisions from alternative schools than entry, and c) student’s return to a less restrictive setting not contingent on those factors considered when placing the student into the school. (Hoge et al., 2014, p. 218)

Despite, aggression being one of the main contributors to student placement in segregated settings the authors noted it was not the main reason for determining when a student was ready to exit the program. Hoge et al. (2014), state that, “a need exists for more information about why factors unrelated to the initial placement seem to prevent students from transitioning back to less restrictive environments” (p. 224). Additionally, the receiving schools’ perception of safety was also a factor in students remaining in alternative programs (Hoge et al., 2014). As a result, “the burden of proof often lies on the displaced student to demonstrate he or she will not present the same problem behaviors that led to placement in the alternative setting” (Hoge et al., 2014, p. 224).

The goal for most students placed in alternative programs is to return to their sending school. Hoge and Avila (2014), found that there was a lack of investment from the “sending school” once students were placed in a more restrictive setting. Participants in the study were comprised of six staff members (the principal, school psychologist, teachers, and aids) to get their perspective on working with students with ED. It was found that, the majority of students
were placed due to extreme behavior that staff in the referring school felt was too difficult to manage (Hoge & Avila, 2014). Additionally, “participants felt that the school operated primarily as a sanctuary (or dumping ground) for students who are deemed undesirable by ‘sending schools’” (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 299). Throughout the interviews, a common theme among staff was centered on whether or not the program’s actual purpose was to prepare students to return to their sending school. Hoge and Avila (2014), found that all of the participants pointed out that once a student was placed, the previous school “washed their hands clean of them” and were no longer involved or interested in their outcomes” (p. 308). The lack of connectedness made transitioning out difficult despite the alternative program determination that a student was ready. Additionally, the participants “appeared to struggle with identifying clear expectations for their program based on the limited involvement of ‘sending schools’ (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 308). Although participants were aware of the programs’ goal to prepare students to return to their sending school, the push back they received was counter to their mission. The authors found that, the isolation of working at a school like Hinton left many feeling disconnected from the district. “This condition brings into question the efficacy of a program like Hinton, its potential ability to provide effective educational services for students with ED and ultimately return students to a less restrictive educational environment” (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 314).

**Classification of Emotional Disturbance and Subjectivity**

A report on “The Segregation of Students with Disabilities” (2018), found that “when students are included, they have more access to the general curriculum and effective instruction, they achieve at higher rates of academic performance, and they acquire better social and behavioral outcomes” (National Council on Disability, p. 37). The mindset that special education is a location rather than a set of services to better support students with high leverage practices
and engaging content in the LRE adds to the segregation of students with ED in alternative programs. There is growing concern that over-identification of students with ED has far reaching effects on the quality of educational opportunities and post-secondary outcomes (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

Questions regarding assessment policies and practices linking misidentification and disproportionate representation of minoritized students with ED in alternative programs has risen over the past few decades (National Education Association, 2007). In a study of “Racial Differences in Special Education Identification and Placement,” Grinal et al. (2019), found that bias is present in special education and that discrimination and implicit bias lead to disproportionate number of minority students in special education. According to Grinal et al. (2019):

some have attributed the high rates of special education placement among students of color to educators’ implicit and explicit beliefs regarding the capacities of students from different backgrounds (interpersonal racism) and the systematic biases built into the structure of our communities and schools (structural racism). (p. 528)

The attitudes and stereotypes that educators unconsciously possess contribute to the judgements and perception of their students. This implicit bias leads to disproportionate referrals to special education. Structural racism or implicit discriminatory practices and policies have negative educational outcomes for students disproportionately placed in segregated settings. The authors recommend professional development on implicit and systematic bias to reduce special education over identification and subsequent restrictive educational placements (Grinal et al., 2019).
Harry and Klinger (2006), explain that special education and race are co-constructed, perpetuating social processes that continue to foster the marginalization of multiply minoritized students. Traditional educational systems that subscribe to normative cultural standards fails to see disability as a social construct and their role in perpetuating these social processes. Students are often placed in classrooms based on traditional assessments, which group students based on perceived ability. Traditional assessments include norm referenced tests that have limited skill sampling. According to Harry and Klinger (2006):

we argue that the process of determining children’s eligibility for special education is anything but a science. Rather, it is the result of social forces that intertwine to construct an identity of ‘disability’ for children whom the regular-education system finds too difficult to serve. (p. 9)

Traditional practices of placing multiply minoritized students into disability categories fails to acknowledge the social, political, and historical forces that have shaped student outcomes and their role in the disproportionate labeling and placement of multiply minoritized students in alternative programs. Hoge et al. (2014), pointed out the need to accurately report statistics on the number of students placed in alternative school settings. What we do know, however, is that there is a disproportionate number of minority students being served in special education. There are a multitude of reasons that disproportionality or over-representation in special education is a serious concern for students. As Ferri and Connor (2005) state, “between 1954 and the present time, we must acknowledge not only the lack of progress toward racial integration in schools nationwide, but also the problem of overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs” (p. 454). Although gains have been made in terms of educational reform
efforts, special education has served as a vehicle to continue the oppression and segregation of students with disabilities and students of color.

**The Problem with Overrepresentation**

Disproportionate placement of minoritized students in special education reverberates throughout the lifespan. Minority students inappropriately placed in special education programs face negative consequences as a result of misclassification such as a) unwarranted services and supports; b) limited access to rigorous curricula and lower expectations; c) less access to academically able peers and social stigma; and d) significant racial segregation (NEA Policy Brief, 2007).

In a study conducted on the Disproportionate Representation of African American Students in Programs for Students with ED, McKenna (2013), found that “although special education services are designed to improve student outcomes, the provision of services may result in social stigma, removal from the general education setting, and inadequate learning opportunities” (p. 206). When students are removed from the general education classroom and placed in segregated settings it may hinder academic and social emotional growth (McKenna, 2013). There are a multitude of reasons why over-representation or disproportionality of minoritized students with ED being placed in alternative programs is a serious concern. According to Harry and Klinger (2006):

what has come to be known as the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education programs is the result of a series of social processes that, once set in motion, are interpreted as the inevitable outcomes of real conditions with children. These social processes do not occur by happenstance, or by the good or evil intentions of a few individuals. Rather, they reflect a set of societal beliefs and values, political agendas, and
historical events that combine to construct the official version of who these children are. (p. 7)

The overrepresentation of minoritized students in special education serves as another manifestation of institutional racism that segregates students in the most restrictive educational settings. Further, these social and institutional structures become vehicles for marginalization and segregation of students. According to Heitzgig (2016), “The American public-school system has such a disproportionate number of African Americans in special education, that it has come to resemble the era of racial segregation where Blacks were relegated to separate but (un)equal schools” (p. 8). Regardless of educational placement, students with ED require access to teachers who are well versed on engaging students and building community.

**Teachers in Alternative Programs**

It is essential to bring to light the demographic profile of teachers who serve students with ED. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2020), “In 2017, a total of 362,027, or 93 percent, of the 389,456 full-time equivalent (FTE) special education teachers who provided special education and related services for students ages 6 through 21 under IDEA, Part B, were fully certified” (p. xxix). Billingsley, Fall and Williams (2006), conducted a national study to compare teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) with non-EBD special educators, focusing on individuals’ characteristics and readiness to teach. The authors found that teachers serving students with EBD had significantly fewer years of teaching experience, were less likely to be certified (with a small proportion holding certification in core academic domains) and were more likely to have acquired their teaching positions through alternative programs compared to other special educators (Billingsley et al., 2006).
According to Taie and Goldring, (2017), “in the 2015–16 school year, there were an estimated 3,827,100 teachers in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. About 80 percent of all public-school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were non-Hispanic Black, and 2 percent were non-Hispanic Asian” (para. 1). The data point that examined teacher race and ethnicity for the 2017–2018 school year found that despite efforts from policy makers and school districts these changes in overall minority representation also have not been evenly distributed across different minority subgroups. The number of Asian and Hispanic teachers increased at a higher rate than Black teachers, and American Indian teachers sharply declined in number during this period (Tai & Goldring, 2017). According to Egalite, Kisida and Winters (2015), research suggests that there are academic benefits when students and teachers share the same race/ethnicity because such teachers can serve as role models, mentors, and advocates.

In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, districts were asked to respond to a survey indicating how staff was hired or placed to teach in alternative placements. The survey data showed that a majority (86 percent) of districts with special education alternative schools and programs for at-risk students hired teachers specifically to teach in such schools and programs. A smaller percentage of districts transferred teachers by choice from a regular school (49 percent), and an even smaller percentage assigned teachers involuntarily to positions in alternative schools and programs (10 percent) (Kleiner, et al., 2002, p. 25). It should come as no surprise that teachers who are involuntarily assigned to alternative settings have been found to be less effective than teachers who chose to teach in these settings.

Another concern for students placed in alternative programs is access to qualified teachers. According to Lehr and Lange (2012), a lack of qualified special education and regular education teachers to teach in alternative programs is an area of concern. School districts often
look to hire teachers who are dual certified due to the small teacher to student ratio and nature of segregated classrooms (National Council on Disability, 2018). These positions are hard to fill leaving the candidate pool narrow. Sir Ken Robinson, author, speaker and international advisor on education stated in his Ted Talk, “there is no system in the world or any school in the country that is better than its teachers. Teachers are the lifeblood of the success of schools” (2006, 06:12). Successful alternative programs recruit and retain teachers who possess the characteristics necessary to help students succeed both academically and socially-emotionally (McDaniels et al., 2019)

A review of the empirical research suggests a collective concern amongst stakeholders for increased teacher preparedness in meeting the needs of students placed in alternative settings (Kleiner et al., 2002). Recruiting talented teachers for these programs and promoting their success with students with ED should be a priority (National Education Association, 2007). Research confirms that better student outcomes are obtained when teachers are well trained, caring, and communicate high expectations, are highly motivated and responsive to the diverse needs of their students (Conover, 2018).

**Teacher Perceptions of Students**

Educators have the greatest impact on a students’ ability to make academic and social, emotional gains. Teachers who are responsive to the diverse needs of their students and invested in their success result in better student outcomes (Jung et al., 2019). It is critical that students with ED are seen as competent and that teachers create a classroom climate that fosters equity and inclusion. In a qualitative case study of teacher effectiveness with at-risk students in alternative settings Conover (2018), identified four themes that were effective in meeting student needs 1) understanding; 2) defining moment; 3) teacher beyond academics; and 4) perspective
and outlook which are described below. The importance that educators placed on the building relationships and understanding students was a factor contributing to student success. Additionally, each of the participants “in the study had a defining moment in their life when they knew that working with at-risk students in an alternative setting is something they wanted to do” (Conover, 2018, p. 107).

One of the most consistent findings in the study was the importance that participants placed on understanding their students, their backgrounds, and academic and social emotional needs (Conover, 2018). Teachers’ perceptions of students did not focus on a student’s label or behavior but rather on what was driving the behavior and looking for strategies to re-direct in a positive manner (Conover, 2018). All of the participants were interested in their students’ lives beyond academics and were vested in their students’ success. Participants expressed how their approach to students was different both professionally and personally than traditional schools (Conover, 2018). Furthermore, data suggest that teacher perceptions about the students who attend alternative programs influence the conceptualization of social competence and potential for success.

In a qualitative study of an alternative school for students with ED, Hoge and Avila (2014) found that participants’ “attitudes about their students and their belief in them, may have contributed to their personal reasons to continue working at Hinton despite its reputation” (p. 306). Despite sending schools’ reluctance to stay engaged with the students they had referred and placed at Hinton, Hoge and Avila, (2014), found that teachers in this setting were able to get to know their students despite the negative stereotypes and stigma attached to them. One of the participants spoke about the students “for the most part, these kids are amazing. This is their last chance. So here, we try to step up, to where, we can move them back” (Hoge and Avila, 2014, p.
Despite the schools’ perception of students, staff consistently worked to provide students with the skills they would need to return to their sending school.

Review of the literature identified the need for additional research on alternative settings and the role of segregated schools from the special education teacher’s point of view (Hoge and Avila, 2014). Specifically, interview questions were developed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of promising pedagogical practices and barriers to fulfilling the mission of the program to return students to LRE settings once placed. One participant reflected on a student that was able to transition and her disappointment with the receiving school:

Smart kid, and they sent him back in a week… After talking to them, I feel, they didn’t try anything. How can they send you guys [them] back and say that you can’t make it when, on their end, I feel like they are not holding up their part, at all (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 307).

Hoge and Avila (2014), state that, “what has been especially absent in the research literature is the perspective of individuals who work within these programs, how collaboration (or lack thereof) with schools impacts their perception of their professional effectiveness, and how a fractured or inequitable relationship may negatively impact the students placed in these programs” (p. 313). The perspective of special education teachers who work in alternative programs can provide insight into high leverage practices and experiences of students with ED in these settings.

**High Leverage Practices in Alternative Programs**

According to Addis, Greer and Dunlap (2020), alternative schools and programs vary widely in terms of their effectiveness to meet the diverse needs of students placed there. A study of Effective Alternative Education Programs by Quinn & Poirier (2007), found that the
characteristics of alternative programs that were effective in promoting positive student outcomes included: 1) small student to teacher ratio; 2) flexibility in programming 3) parent involvement; 4) high expectations for students and student engagement; and, 5) professional development for teachers. Teachers and administrators reported that the flexibility that alternative programs have in terms of providing supports needed for students with ED with challenging behaviors would not be possible in typical schools (Thompson et al., 2017). The flexibility of an alternative setting provided staff time within the instructional day to focus on preparing students to return to an LRE. A parent stated that, ”flexibility in academic requirements was important to her son’s success: “[the teachers] individualize what [the students] need. If it doesn’t work, [there is] no problem trying something else.” Students also commented that it is important that programs provide this flexibility and individualization” (Quinn & Poirier, 2007, p 36). One of the concerns with alternative programs is the lack of connectedness within the district they are in; however, the lack of oversight at times provides flexibility in adjusting programming.

Quinn and Poirier (2007), found that teachers in their study were able to separate student behaviors from the individual student displaying disruptive behavior. Parents also commented that “teachers look at students as individuals, not down on them” (Quinn & Poirier, p. 33). The findings indicated that “students are not ‘problem individuals’ but instead are individuals who have a great number of problems” (p. 33). Quinn & Poirier, (2007) state that, “effective classroom management, flexibility, small class size, and staff collaboration are imbedded in the philosophies of these programs and are integral to their identities and approaches to effectively serving their students” (p. 16).
Students can flourish in alternative programs when they believe that teachers, staff, and administrators respected and cared about them, established a community that fostered cooperation and mutual respect, taught in a non-authoritarian manner, and established classroom codes of conduct with students’ support (Quinn & Poirier, 2007). Effective pedagogical practices aim to meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Quinn & Poirier (2007), identified several themes throughout their study, which were linked to effective practices in meeting the needs of students deemed at-risk:

1. Program philosophies that emphasize adjusting the educational approach and accommodating learning differences among students, rather than expecting the individual student to adjust or adapt to a standardized approach.

2. Program administrators and staff subscribing to the philosophy that all students can learn.

3. Program and school administrators supporting the vision and mission of their programs.

4. Low adult-student ratios in the classroom.

5. Teachers who receive specialized training.

6. Interactions between students and the staff who are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.

7. The opinions and participation of family members in the education of their children is valued and students’ families are treated with respect. (p. ii).

Alternative programs whose stated philosophy and mission aimed to meet the diverse learning needs of their students and provide targeted supports, while maintaining high expectations for
positive social, emotional and academic growth in all students were viewed as effective by staff. A school-wide belief that it is the teacher’s job to make content accessible instead of expecting the student to adjust was key to student growth and positive outcomes. Furthermore, building relationships with students and families was essential to successful practice. The importance of building relationships with students and an administration that supports the mission of the school was identified as effective by Hoge and Avila (2014).

In a study of alternative education programs Maillet (2017), recommends six practices to transform alternative programs into effective service-delivery systems. The six practices recommended include: 1) provide active and creative instruction; 2) integrate service-learning opportunities into all aspects of the program; 3) accelerate student learning; and, 4) build time into the schedule to connect with kids (Maillet, 2017). It was found that building positive and trusting relationships and having high expectations promoted student achievement. Each day time was set aside in the schedule for students to connect with adults during morning meeting and an additional connect time could be earned as an incentive. Most of the student had BIPs and staff were consistently working with students on replacement behaviors. Additionally, there was a reflection room in which students could go as needed.

A thoughtful approach was taken to provide active and creative instruction. Students were provided opportunities to engage with software programs, hands-on learning and manipulatives to engage and demonstrate learning. Additionally, service-learning opportunities were an important component of programming in which students were able to participate in enriched learning opportunities that met the required academic learning standards (Maillet, 2017). Through service-learning students formed positive relationships with participating community agencies.
In a comparative study on effective strategies for alternative school improvement, Addis et al. (2020), found that “there are strategies, approaches, and solutions, that if implemented properly, will significantly improve the effectiveness of existing alternative schools and programs (p. 1). The authors identified five domains and 32 focus areas for school leaders to consider assessing current programming, identify areas for improvement and guide action steps. The five domains address 1) governance practice and policy; 2) culture and climate; 3) instruction and effective practice; 4) external factors; and, 5) resources. Throughout their research Addis et al. (2020) questioned, “what areas of operation and practice should leaders consider as they undertake to improve alternative schools and programs?” (p. 5) Addis et al. (2020) found that while some alternative programs struggled with poor student outcomes some managed to implement effective programming due to these common elements.

One of the focus areas under governance practice and policy asks school leaders to consider, “are the philosophy and mission of the alternative school evident in the practices and conduct of the alternative program”? (Addis et al., 2020, p.7) This focus area also supports the research by Hoge and Avila (2014) in which participants reflected on the larger district being mostly unaware of the purpose of Hinton. Additionally, under the focus area of culture and climate, Addis et al. (2020) asks, “are all students afforded positive relationships with responsible staff members that foster desired behaviors and academic engagement?” (p. 8).

The importance of developing relationships and the connection to student success was evident throughout the literature. Addis et al. (2020), posed the question under the domain of external factors, “to what extent are families, parents, and guardians of alternative students informed, engaged with, and supportive of the program, the staff, and contributing to student
success?” (p. 10). Building relationships with families and having them as a partner in a student’s educational planning was important for student success (Quinn & Poirier, 2007).

Addis et al. (2020), asked “is the school adequately staffed to achieve desired outcomes? Are staff members carefully selected and assigned to match individual and professional strengths and skills to best meet program and student needs?” (p. 10). It was clear throughout the literature review that teachers who wanted to teach in alternative programs were more successful in building relationships with students and student outcomes (Lehr & Lange, 2012). The 32 focus areas and guiding questions that the authors posed to assist school leaders and policy makers to assess and improve alternative schools and programs were found to be indicative of high leverage practices in alternative settings. The authors note that, “If districts can improve the student outcomes of their alternative schools and programs by making those schools more efficient and effective, they are likely to achieve significantly higher system wide graduation rates and system accountability ratings” (Addis et al., 2020, p. 5). Kumm et al. (2020), found that students in alternative education placements would benefit from evidence-based interventions targeting both academic and social-emotional supports.

**Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)**

Research consistently finds that students with disabilities who are educated in segregated placements receive less instruction, have fewer opportunities to learn, and fewer opportunities to use knowledge and skills during instruction and other meaningful activities (National Council on Disability, 2018, p. 39). According to McDaniel, Wilkinson and Simonsen (2018), for students who have demonstrated their behavior posed a safety risk in a typical school setting, an alternative placement can serve as therapeutic, safe, and instructional environment. McDaniel et al. (2018), stated that “for these students, it is imperative that teachers, administrators,
counselors, and other related school faculty have access to evidence-based interventions” (p. 127). One such approach to providing academic and social-emotional, behavioral interventions for students is a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act. This focus of ESSA is to “advance equity by upholding critical protections for America’s disadvantaged and high-need students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ESSA provides a definition of MTSS as a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data based instructional decision making. (Sec 8101(33)). MTSS is a continuum of increasingly intensive research-based interventions provided to students that respond to their academic and/or behavioral needs. It includes ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of the interventions provided.

It is important to note that MTSS is intended to meet the needs of all learners, including student with disabilities (Morgan, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) refers to MTSS as an approach for increasing student achievement and teacher effectiveness. MTSS can be thought of as an umbrella that covers both academic and social-emotional behavioral supports for students. Often times, MTSS is used interchangeably with RTI and PBIS but it is not the same; as MTSS encompasses both academic and social emotional interventions to support students (Ehlers, 2018). It is a framework that includes both Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). There are three tiers of support within the framework:

Tier 1 (Universal Prevention – all students) supports serve as the foundation for behavior and academics. Schools provide these universal supports to all students. For most
students, the core program gives them what they need to be successful and to prevent future problems.

Tier 2: Targeted Prevention (Some) This level of support focuses on improving specific skill deficits students have. Schools often provide Tier 2 supports to groups of students with similar targeted needs. Providing support to a group of students provides more opportunities for practice and feedback while keeping the intervention maximally efficient.

Tier 3: Intensive, Individualized Prevention (Few) are the most intensive supports the school offers. At this level, schools typically rely on formal assessments to determine a student’s need and to develop an individualized support plan. Student plans often include goals related to both academics as well as behavior. (Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2021)

Tier 3 supports are the most intensive and require the most resources due to the intensity of support and inventions. Students in an alternative program would all have received tier 1 supports in their home school. Typically, students with IEPs would also have been receiving tier 2 supports prior to being placed in a more restrictive alternative setting. MTSS is represented in figure 1 below.

Figure 1

*Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*

(TransitionCoalition.org, 2021)
**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Though an RTI model has been found to be effective in typical school settings, there are few studies that evaluate the effectiveness of an RTI model in alternative programs (Thomas, 2017). According to Thomas (2017), interventions for students with ED have tended to focus on behavioral management (e.g., classroom management, social skills, and anger management) often to the exclusion of other needs of these students” (p. 6). According to McKenna, “because numerous factors may contribute to overrepresentation, it may be beneficial to use assessment and teaching methods consistent with response to intervention (RTI)” (2013, p. 9). RTI has four elements that include: 1) universal screening; 2) research-based interventions; 3) progress monitoring; and, 4) data-based decisions. When academic and social-emotional behavioral supports are implemented with fidelity, it becomes a means for schools to move toward more proactive, comprehensive systems of support (Freeman et al., 2017).

Addis et al. (2020), provided school leaders and policy makers guiding questions to improve existing alternative schools and programs. Addis et al. (2020) asked school leaders, “do instructional practices consider and address the academic deficiencies of individual students?” (p. 9). Effective alternative programs plan for and implement instructional programming and the use of interventions for both academic and social emotional supports (Addis et al., 2020). Despite MTSS being appropriate for both typical students and students with IEPs, most of the literature focused on students in alternative programs involves PBIS. Regarding tiers of intervention, I found no research studies that describe or measure the implementation of RTI across all three tiers for students in alternative programs.

Attention to academic deficiencies is an area that needs to be addressed in alternative programs. One of the challenges regarding student transitions to LRE setting was the lack of
systematic approach to demonstrating student readiness to return to the sending school. A MTSS may be one option for alternative programs to implement; using the data to demonstrate to receiving schools that a student has met expectations thus ready to return. Unfortunately, students in alternative programs have the extra burden of having to prove that they are entitled to an LRE. The elements included in implementation of RTI may be one such option for alternative programs to refute any reluctance or refusal from receiving schools.

*Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies (PBIS)*

Research suggests that when PBIS is implemented with fidelity in alternative settings positive academic and behavioral outcomes result; including decreases in office discipline referrals (ODRs) and other measures of serious behavioral infractions, as well as improvements in measures of general behavior” (McDaniel et al., 2020, p. 122). Integrating PBIS into alternative programs requires knowledge of evidence-based practices and thoughtful planning. In a study on Stakeholders Perspectives on PBIS Implementation in Alternative Educational Settings, Swain-Bradway, Swoszowski, Boden and Sprague (2014), found five promising practices identified by participants as effective: 1) evidence based-instructional practices; 2) active support of teachers and staff members; (3 positive response to youth behavior; 4) prioritized data practices; and, 5) multi-tiered organization of responses to youth problem behavior (p. 37). Swain-Bradway et al. (2014), indicated that alternative programs provide the setting to implement evidence-based practices and collection of data to assess student growth. Staff reported feeling supported with access to on-going PBIS professional development (Swain-Bradway et al., 2014).

Furthermore, utilizing PBIS showed that prioritized data practices and positive response to student behavior was another promising trend. Regardless of educational settings students
with ED are entitled to interventions equal to that of their non-disabled peers (Flower et al., 2011). A comprehensive framework that addresses both behavioral and academic deficits could help with closing the achievement gap (McDaniel et al., 2020).

**Challenges Facing Alternative Programs**

Alternative schools and programs are many and varied but face common challenges in terms of implementation of programming to meet the needs of the students that are placed there. In a study of alternative settings and the students they serve, Lehr and Lange (2003), found that staffing, funding, and accountability were reported by state directors of special education as areas of concern. State directors of special education from each of the fifty states participated in a phone interview querying about alternative settings in their state. Participants reported a need for licensed teachers who are qualified to work with students with significant academic and behavioral needs (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

In a comparative case study of three alternative schools and programs for students at risk of educational failure in New York State, Harrison (2017), found these programs did not require staff to complete a specific number of courses or hours to work in this segregated setting. Participants indicated that there was no special training or certification required to work with students with ED and professional development was not offered. According to Harrison (2017), “participants expressed that they used their general knowledge about education, instructional techniques and student management in order to assist them in their duties in the alternative education program” (p. 97) The only requirement for professional development “stemmed from the 175 hours that NYS requires for teachers to maintain their certification under the new regulations (Harrison, 2017, p. 97).
Thompson et al. (2017) convey that recruiting effective teachers to the field should be a priority. Research demonstrated that there are higher rates of teacher burnout in this field, but some teachers thrive in this setting (Thompson et al., 2017). More training and support to better support teachers in meeting the needs of students with ED is key to supporting teacher retention. A formal approach to behavioral interventions was another area that was identified as needed. Thompson et al. (2017), noted that teachers need access to programs that include “structured, sequential, and comprehensive emotional and behavioral skills instruction” (p. 9). To be effective, an intervention must work at all levels (e.g., the student, classroom, school, and school system) (Thompson et al., 2017).

Hoge and Avila (2014), found that professional development was an area that was lacking, which participants felt impacted their ability to work with students. One of the participants in their study reflected on having a master’s degree in special education but little training when it came to manage challenging behaviors. Additionally, administration indicated that staffing the program with qualified teachers was challenging.

According to Addis et al. (2020) “while there are alternative schools and programs that are well resourced, have excellent facilities, and are staffed with highly skilled and specialized educators, there are also alternative schools that receive only left-over resources, are housed in the worst of facilities, and are staffed by educators who were unable to succeed or to find employment in traditional schools” (p. 4). Additionally, Lehr and Lange (2002), found that State Directors questioned the quality of instructional programming and implementation of students’ IEPs.

Additionally, Hoge and Avila (2014), found that staff was frustrated with the lack of district support and oversight in programming decisions. When students were ready to transition
the sending school were often reluctant to take students back once placed. One participant reflected, “it was a challenge to overcome the “out of sight, out of mind” attitude of the school district community (district administration and ‘sending schools’) toward Hinton” (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 311). Programming challenges led to participants questioning the purpose of their alternative program within the larger district. One participant commented that, “if schools placing students at Hinton truly expected a return back to a less restrictive setting, steps would be written into the IEP to map out a specific exit plan upon entry into the program (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p.311). But according to the school psychologist, instances occurred where students, having met program goals, did not have a placement within the district to which they could return. One of the teachers interviewed stated, “it was a challenge to overcome the “out of sight, out of mind” attitude of the school district community (district administration and ‘sending schools’) toward Hinton (Hoge & Avila, 2014, p. 311).

Reputation of Alternative Programs

Students with EBD often get the label of “bad kid” and it is difficult for them to get out from under that label, no matter what other skills or gifts they possess. Some students with EBD that have spent time in other settings such as an alternative school and they do gain that positive identity and sense of self once they are in those settings, yet they are once again labeled as “bad kids” when they return to a conventional high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The reputation that follows students that attend these programs or have the label of ED are difficult to shed and act as a barrier to reintegrating to a less restrictive setting.

Another challenge that alternative programs face is the stigma attached to the program and students that attend them. According to Addis et al. (2020), “it is also no surprise that alternative programs have problems with image, both in the community and within the school
system, are harder to appropriately staff, and often give rise to a variety of challenges, difficulties, and accountability problems for school leaders” (p. 4). Hoge and Avila (2014), found that educators outside of their school “cringe when they hear the name of our school.” Moreover, since Hinton was primarily associated with students placed there, “the program’s identity was more closely aligned with the negative reputation of its students than its actual purpose” (p. 306). The principal shared that staff within the district often referred to students as criminals, scary, or bad people” (Hoge & Avila, 2014).

Chapter Summary

As I reflect on my professional experiences as an educator and an administrator, I am aware how the social construction of race and disability further perpetuates the oppression and discrimination of minoritized students and students with disabilities. It is hard not to see how the intersection of race and dis/ability influences a student’s educational path. I am also cognizant of how special education is a vehicle for segregating students in more restrictive settings despite the Civil Rights Movements and Educational Reform efforts. The dominant culture has constructed race in a way that promotes a Eurocentric point of view. This view is often present in our classrooms, which perpetuates a deficit thinking which leads to over-representation of minority students in special education. Our public-school systems continue to operate according to the values of the dominant culture and foster beliefs that perpetuate the cycle of oppression and discrimination experienced by multiply minoritized youth with disabilities.

The literature review assisted in guiding the research by providing a theoretical framework from which to inform this study. According to Annamma, Ferri and Connor (2018), much of the scholarship exploring the intersections of race and dis/ability in education to date has focused on highlighting the persistent problem of students of color being disproportionately
placed in special education, particularly in the most subjective categories of learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities and ED. The review of the literature suggests that there is limited research available nationally on the characteristics of special education alternative schools and outcomes for students placed in these settings (Lehr & McComas, 2003). Research has broadly examined the implications for students with ED whose needs are not met in a traditional school setting. Research examining alternative programs from the perspective of experienced special education teachers who teach in these settings is a much-needed area of inquiry.

Throughout the literature review common themes have emerged and are examined through previously conducted research studies and include: (a) limited research data available on alternative program placements from the perspective of teachers who teach students in this setting; (b) staffing and the role that teachers have in the education of students in alternative programs; (c) accountability and criteria for entrance and transition out of alternative programs; and, (d) the over-identification of minoritized students in alternative programs. In sum, current research supports that no consistent, comprehensive, replicable program for alternative program for students with ED exists.

The proposed study will contribute to the literature by providing better understanding from the perspective of experienced special education teachers the defining characteristics of alternative programming and the elements required for comprehensive supports and services for students with ED. Furthermore, understanding the role alternative programs play in the education of students identified as having an ED from the perspective of teachers working in these setting may enhance services and help to facilitate successful school outcomes for students with disabilities and eliminate the need for these most restrictive segregated settings.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Although most students with disabilities now have more school and classroom based special education supports and services available to them, students with ED continue to experience less positive educational outcomes, are more likely to be educated in restrictive settings, and more likely to be subjected to harsh disciplinary practices leading to the school-to-prison pipeline than other students with disabilities (Harper, 2017). The over-identification of students of color with ED, thus, has far reaching effects on the equality of educational opportunities and post-secondary outcomes afforded to these students. According to Ferri and Connor (2005), “schools uphold and reinforce the dominant beliefs of society. As such, they are examples of racism and ableism in practice, although they are rarely portrayed in this way. The power manifested within them is masked by purported neutrality” (p. 470).

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate, from the lived experience of special education teachers working in an alternative program for students with ED, the features associated with effective programming as well as the barriers to successfully supporting students in these settings. The phenomenon being studied were the pockets of promise or promising practices and barriers to successful implementation of transitioning students to LRE once placed from the participants perspective working with students at this program. The study aimed to provide insight into the lived experience of special education teachers working with students in the most segregated setting in an urban district to ascertain their perspectives on practices that better prepare students to transition to less restrictive
educational settings. Teachers are in the best position to add to the body of literature because they are the ones immersed with their students on a daily basis and can speak to their knowledge educating students in this program.

Guided by three broad research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with special education teachers at an alternative program to identify, from their experience, how schools can better meet the diverse, ever-changing needs of students with ED who are removed from less restrictive settings. Specifically, the study sought to: (a) develop a deeper understanding of the effective practices that teachers in an alternative program employ when programming for students who are placed there; (b) understand the challenges that teachers encounter when implementing effective transition planning to less restrictive settings; and (c) consider how DisCrit can serve as a frame for understanding special education as a social justice issue. The chapter also discusses the research design and procedures for data collection, thematic data analysis, coding structure, and themes.

The theoretical framework of DisCrit when applied to the field of education examines how race, racism, dis/ability and ability are socially constructed and play out in our public-school system. DisCrit looks at ways in which dis/ability and race have been used to marginalize groups of students and how labeling students ED and placing them in segregated settings reinforces the structures of “normativity” in an ableist and racist society. Annamma et al. (2013) stated, “DisCrit recognizes that normative cultural standards such as whiteness and ability lead to viewing differences among certain individuals as deficits” (p. 11).

I interviewed seven special education teachers for this study. I focused my data collection and analysis on exploring commonalities, patterns, and themes to understand and identify from the experience of participants successful practices and barriers to successful implementation
when programming for academic and SEL needs of students. The following section includes a reiteration of the problem statement and research questions as well as a description of the overall research design. I used a phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand others through the reality of people’s lived experience (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), as the research design for my investigation. Semi-structured open-ended questions addressed three guiding research questions:

1. How do you define successful practices for students you work with? Tell me about a student you felt good about in terms of how you were able to meet their needs as a special education teacher?

2. What do you see as barriers to kids transitioning back to more inclusive settings? Tell me about a student who you felt we or the system failed? What do you think was the cause of that failure and how might things have gone differently?

3. We know the federal definition of ED is, but how do you define it for yourself? What do the students here all have in common in terms of the label or besides the label? How do you think race, class, culture, and gender play into who gets labeled? What would it take for that to change? These are interrogatives to collect data, but what are your overarching research questions? What do you want to know from these interview questions?

**Research Context, Site Access and Description**

The setting for this study is an alternative program in a large urban district in New York State. The pseudonym for the setting will be referred to as G. Willow Alternative Program and the school district will be referred to as Contemporary School District. According to the Contemporary School District’s Office of Shared Accountability, anyone who wishes to conduct a study must have their proposals reviewed and approved by the Research Review Committee.
(RRC). The proposal was approved by the district’s RRC and all requirements were met prior to start of the study.

This research was conducted in the Contemporary School District, a large urban district serving over 20,000 PK-12th grade students. Like many urban districts, Contemporary School District continues to face shifting demographics and a changing economy, with the widest poverty gap between students attending urban and suburban districts. Over 85 percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged. In terms of race and ethnicity approximately 20 percent identify as white and the remaining population of students identify as Black or African American, American Indian, Hispanic or Latino, Multiracial and Asian or Pacific Islander. Approximately 20 percent of the students are classified as students with disabilities and 3% of those students are placed in separate educational settings within this district. Table 1 displays special education data for the 2019 – 2020 school year representing LRE, graduation rates and suspension rate for the entire population at Contemporary School District.
### Table 1

*Contemporary School District Special Education Data 2019 – 2020*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Setting (LRE)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80% or more of the day in a general education classroom</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 – 79% of the day in a general education classroom</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 40% of the day in a general education classroom</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate settings</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other settings</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation Data</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-out rate</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suspension Rate</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out of school for more than 10 days</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Demographics at G. Willow Alternative Program**

G. Willow Alternative Program provided the setting for this dissertation. Classrooms at the program are organized around a staff to student ratio of 8:1:2, meaning eight students, one teacher, and two teaching assistants. Student enrollment at G. Willow Alternative Program for the 2019 – 2020 school year totaled 54 students in grades K-12, 12 of whom were female and 42 were male. Out of the 54 students, 30 identify as Black or African American, 6 identify as Hispanic or Latino and 18 identify as White. Of the 54 students 16 are classified as Other Health Impaired (OHI), two are students with Autism, two students are classified as Learning Disabled (LD), four students are classified as Multiple Disabilities (MD), and 30 students are classified as
Emotional Disturbed (ED). Students that attend this program are placed in this setting with an underdetermined return date to their sending school. Table 2 displays student enrollment for the 2019 – 2020 school year broken down by gender, race, disability, and grade level.

Table 2

G. Willow Alternative Program Enrollment (gender, race, disability, grade)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>IEP Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OHI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OHI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>LD</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>MD</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>OHI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Participant Identification, Selection and Invitation

I interviewed seven special education teachers in an alternative program setting in New York State with a minimum of four years of professional teaching experience. The selection of research participants in qualitative research has a significant effect on the quality of the research. Creswell and Creswell (2017), stated that there is no true answer to how many participants are enough, although the author suggests seven participants as the minimum number. The criteria for the proposed qualitative study required that participants be:

1. A special educator working at G. Willow Alternative Program
2. Certified in special education with a minimum of four years of teaching

The rationale for selection criteria of four years of teaching experience marks the point at which teachers may or may not gain tenure status. Teachers go through a probationary period of four years and once a teacher gains tenure permanent employment within the school district is granted. Tenure means that termination can only occur for a justifiable cause or under extreme circumstances; therefore, participants would feel freer to state their opinions than a new teacher without tenure status. Furthermore, experienced teachers would be able to reflect more deeply on practice, have more experiences with both promising practices and barriers experienced by teachers.

Participants selected for this investigation were thus relevant to the focus of inquiry for this study. According to Maykuit and Morehouse (1994), the goal was not “to build a random sample, but rather to select persons or settings that represent the range of experience on the phenomenon in which we are interested” (p. 57). They also note that a “working knowledge of the contexts of the individuals and settings” (p. 57) can be important in selecting participants. If any of the selected participants were unable to participate, I had planned to incorporate the technique of snowball sampling, whereby participants would be asked to recommend potential participants for this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The technique of snowball sampling was not necessary, as a sufficient number of participants agreed to participate.

An invitation email was sent to special education teachers in an alternative program in New York State (Appendix B). The letter outlined the purpose of the study and detailed informed consent information, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The intended safeguards to ensure confidentiality during and after the study were outlined in the letter, including the removal of any unique identifying information such as names, location, and
specific incidents or dates. Each participant signed the consent form prior to being interviewed (see Appendix C). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, after necessary consent forms were returned, participants were interviewed via phone after school hours at a time that was convenient for the participants. I asked participants individually if they preferred phone interview or interview via zoom call lasting no longer than one hour in length. All the participants chose a phone interview, and no follow up interviews were necessary. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

In addition, all interview tapes were maintained by the researcher under lock and key, at the researcher’s home, with no unique identifying information. Assurances that tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the interview was also communicated to participants. A written, informed consent document approved by Syracuse University Institutional Review Board was reviewed by participants before interviews were scheduled.

Special education teachers are rich informants and can describe, in their own words, high leverage practices to meet the needs of students with ED while placed there and when preparing to transition to an LRE. I selected the target population to better understand the perspectives of special education teachers working with students classified as ED in a segregated setting in order to gain insight on how schools can enhance services and help to facilitate successful school outcomes. Moreover, in focusing on “what works” from teachers’ perspectives, the study will aid in developing a deeper understanding of effective pedagogical practices and barriers to successful transition to less restrictive settings.

**Participant Demographics**

The seven participants were selected from a purposeful sampling of certified special education teachers working at G. Willow Alternative Program. All of the students at G. Willow
are students classified as ED with IEP’s therefore the teaching staff are all certified in special education and are responsible for teaching all content areas. All the participants were certified special education teachers with a minimum of four years of teaching experience. At the time of this study, G. Willow Alternative had a total of 13 special education teachers; eight met the eligibility criteria for participation in the study. An email went out to the eight teachers who met the research criteria; seven agreed to participate and one teacher declined. The selection criteria aimed to seek a range of experience and ensure that participants selected were certified in special education.

Participants for the research were special education teachers who met the eligibility criteria to participate in the study and were currently working in an alternative program for students with ED in the Contemporary School District. All of the participants are certified as special education teachers to teach students with disabilities in one or more of the certification areas listed B-2, 1-6 and 7-12. At the time of the study special education teachers who were assigned to high school students did not have content certification for students placed in their self-contained classrooms. Therefore, high school students at G. Willow were not eligible to receive the required credits towards graduation in the four cores (Math, ELA, Social Studies or Science). Additionally, health, foreign language and the arts were not offered as credit bearing courses for high school students as well at G. Willow. The art teacher stated that, “I was never able to teach a studio curriculum with students at Willow and plus I didn’t have the required time with them to award students credit.” The only high school credits that students were able to obtain were physical education credits from the PE teacher that was certified to teacher PK-12. All of the students at G. Willow were on a Regents track and needed the required 22 units of credit to graduate.
Classrooms are organized by grade level with some teachers teaching two grades in a self-contained setting while some have one grade assigned to them, depending on the enrollment. All of the classrooms are self-contained throughout the day and students transition together to attend specials with their peers in their classroom. All of the 13 special education teachers at G. Willow identify as White. Overall, this district has approximately 1,600 teachers on staff; of those only five percent of the teaching staff are Black. Contemporary School District’s teaching staff is not reflective of the racial and ethnic diversity of their student population. There is a big teacher-student diversity gap; with over half of the student body identifying as Black, the odds of a student having a Black teacher are miniscule. Although, I would have liked to include a more diverse participant group, however the demographics of the teaching population in the Contemporary School District was a barrier.

Out of the seven participants, four participants were female and three were male; six of the participants identify as white and one participant identifies as white/other. Professional teaching experience ranged from 4 to 30 years. Table 3 displays demographics of participants at G. Willow Alternative Program for the 2019 – 2020 school year broken down by gender, race/ethnicity, grade level teaching, special education certification, and years taught at time of the study.
Table 3

Demographics of Participants at G. Willow Alternative Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Special Education Teacher Certification</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Other</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The seven participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. Below is a brief description of each participant in relation to demographics, grade level, certification, teaching style and classroom environment based on their own self-descriptions. Participants were asked to describe their teaching style, classroom culture and demographics from their own perspective.

Samantha has been teaching for over four years and teaches students in elementary grade levels. She is certified to teach students with disabilities. She identifies as a white female. Her teaching style was characterized as inquiry-based that encourages student independence, autonomy, and hands-on-learning. Her classroom environment was described as one that fosters high expectations for student achievement, mutual respect and caring.
Olivia has been teaching for over seven years and teaches elementary students. She is certified to teach students with disabilities. She identifies as a white female. Her teaching style was characterized as student centered, one that embraces a cooperative style of learning that focuses on students engaging in group work and social growth. Her classroom environment was characterized as warm and inviting in which students are known as individuals.

Jack has been teaching for over eleven years and teaches students in high school. He is certified to teach students with disabilities. He identifies as a white male. His teaching style was characterized as fostering a student-centered approach in which students are playing an active role in their learning through group work and hands on learning. His classroom environment was described as one that fosters the importance of learning and mutual respect between students and teacher.

Ashley has been teaching for over four years and teaches students in middle school. She is certified to teach students with disabilities. She identifies as a white female. Her teaching style was characterized as student-centered, with her acting as a facilitator focusing on developing students critical thinking skills through personalized learning opportunities. Her classroom environment was characterized as one in which students feel comfortable taking academic risks.

Ryan has been teaching for over sixteen years and teaches students in high school. He is certified to teach students with disabilities. He identifies as other/White. His teaching style was characterized as authoritative or one that follows a traditional teacher centered approach. His classroom environment was characterized as one that fosters high expectations and holding students accountable.

Isabella has been teaching for over sixteen years and teaches students in middle school. She is certified to teach students with disabilities. She identifies as a white female. Her teaching
style was characterized as demonstrator or coach which involves showing students rather than telling. This approach allows for students to engage in experiments and demonstrations. Her classroom community was characterized as warm and inviting focusing on student needs.

Jamie has been teaching for over four years and teaches students in elementary school. He is certified to teach special education. He identifies as a white male. His teaching style was characterized as both teacher and student-centered tailoring instruction to meet the individual needs of his students. His classroom environment was characterized as nurturing focusing on meeting the needs of his students through collaboration.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven special education teachers. This group represents 54 percent of the teaching staff at this alternative program. According to Creswell (2017), semi-structured interviews are commonly employed by qualitative researchers. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask specific questions, but also remain open to explore questions not initially posed to participants, based on the flow of the interview itself. As an administrator in a public-school setting, I have served in both district level and building level leadership positions in a variety of capacities. I am keenly aware of how difficult it would be for teachers to find the time for an interview without interfering with their daily teaching responsibilities. To address this challenge, all interviews were scheduled after school hours at a time that was convenient for participants to avoid disrupting teaching schedules.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The research questions were piloted with two veteran special education teachers to identify any ambiguities with the interview questions and the protocol script. This initial step also afforded me some interview practice and feedback. Throughout the interview protocol
development stage, I remained cognizant that the instruments used for the interview process should pass the reliability and validity tests before being considered as a reliable tool. I assessed the validity and reliability of my interview protocol and questions during this pilot by facilitating the interview process in a systematic, consistent and comprehensive manner. Feedback helped to further refine research questions and ensure that alignment of interview questions and research questions. Interview questions were phrased to gain an understanding of the participants’ perception of effective pedagogical practices and barriers to success.

Lincoln and Guba (1985), posit that trustworthiness of a research study is important to evaluating the worth of the research study. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, generalizable, dependability, and conformability. Believability or credibility will be established through member-checking. All of the participants were provided the opportunity to review interview transcripts. Four of the seven participants reviewed their interview transcript thus providing the opportunity to review what they said, add more information if they wanted to, and edit what they said. None of the four participants who reviewed their interview transcript requested any changes or additions. The remaining three participants declined to review their interview transcript.

Thick, rich descriptions are key to making the study’s lines of inquiry generalizable to other alternative settings serving students with ED. Throughout the data collection and analysis I kept notes or memos about how I was reacting to the interviews in order to reflect critically about my own perspective and relationship to the topic. Dependability was accomplished by using low inference descriptors to ensure an accurate account of what the participants say. To ensure conformability and reduce researcher bias, indexed field notes were maintained to record my own thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about what I was learning from the interviews. This
process allowed me to reflect on my own perspective and relationship to the topic. Observational comments allowed me to explore my thoughts and feelings after the interviews and the research process itself.

To organize the data for analysis, I recorded participant interviews and had them transcribed by Go Transcript, a professional transcription company. I carefully reviewed the transcriptions of the interviews three times to check for accuracy and then proceeded to my initial or first-cycle coding, focusing on my initial impressions. This open-ended process allowed me to analyze the data by capturing words and/or phrases that stood out in my analysis. In my second coding round, I looked for thematic or conceptual similarities in the data. After two cycles of coding, I followed with in-vivo coding to examine the lived experiences, feelings, and emotions of the participants.

Saldana (2016), points out that in-vivo coding is participant inspired rather than researcher-generated because it is grounded in participants’ perspectives and responses. I utilized this approach to pull key words and sentences from participant interviews in order to provide insight into the lived experiences and understanding of special education teacher’s culture and worldview. Codes from each interview and reflective journal were analyzed to create categories and themes to find commonalities as related to the participants’ experiences teaching students in a Special Education Alternative School. The theoretical framework of DisCrit further allowed me to explore how the social construction of race and dis/ability has further perpetuated the segregation of marginalized students in the most restrictive educational settings.

**Initial Coding**

The data analysis for this study consisted of three distinct coding cycles: initial, thematic, and pattern coding. In addition, multiple reviews of field notes and analytical memos served as a
reference to support and track coding choices, themes, and sub-themes. The first cycle, or initial coding of the data, was followed by descriptive coding to identity the participants’ perspectives and actions, comparing the data for similarities and differences. Finally, pattern coding was applied during the third cycle, allowing me to build a framework for analysis of major themes that I identified from the data. Table 4 reflects the themes that emerged from my initial or first cycle coding.
### Table 4

**Special Education Teacher Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Purpose/Meaning of Code</th>
<th>Reported by Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Success</td>
<td>Refers to obstacles special education teachers and students face when programming for students</td>
<td>Participants reported that lack of clear intake, exit, transition, identification all become barriers to student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficit Model of Thinking</td>
<td>Refers to how students with ED are perceived as problems or less capable</td>
<td>Participants reported that the stigma/negative way students at this school are perceived impacts their educational path and ability to transition once placed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Level Supports</td>
<td>Refers to district support/ buy-in to support student programming</td>
<td>Participants reported lack of district level support impacts student transition/equity of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Refers to the school environment (academic/social emotional)</td>
<td>Participants reported that an inconsistency of academic and social emotional supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit Criteria</td>
<td>Refers to the information collected to determine when a student is prepared to transition</td>
<td>Participants felt no clear direction from district/building administration regarding criteria to be used to determine when a student was ready to transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake Process</td>
<td>Refers to the process of students entering the program and expectations for programming</td>
<td>Participants felt there was no clearly defined intake process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Refers to the Special Education Alternative School’s plan for their students and staff</td>
<td>Participants felt the school was unable to fulfill the mission of the program due to barriers both building and district level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical Practices</td>
<td>Refers to the practices and procedures in place to support students</td>
<td>Participants discussed academic and SEL practices that they deemed effective in meeting student needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>Refers to programming needs for meeting the academic and social emotional needs of students</td>
<td>Participants reported inconsistencies in implementing SEL and academic interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Refers to the way that others view students with Emotional Disturbance</td>
<td>Participants spoke about how students are stigmatized by their label and are “out of sight, out of mind”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Refers to the process of returning to a less restrictive setting</td>
<td>Participants referred to the process as not in place, ineffective, not well planned out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the initial coding, I developed categories and subcategories based on commonalities and interrelation. A lumping method was used to reduce the number of first-cycle codes into several relevant categories. According to Saldana (2016), “lumping gets to the essence of a phenomenon” (p.24). This method allowed me to further analyze and sort important data together to uncover significant meaning and insight that informed my second-cycle coding and emerging research themes.

**Thematic Coding Cycle**

During thematic or conceptual coding, I reexamed the data and initial codes to determine categories, patterns, and important concepts. Pattern coding was implemented to reorganize the data and identify emergent themes. As Saldana (2016) explains, “the primary goal during thematic coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes” (p. 234). I further explored and formulated meanings, inferences, and relationships between the codes and related data. I established categories based on the aforementioned information. The categories were then used to develop the themes for the study. Three themes were identified after coding and analyzing the data, included: 1) successful practices; 2) barriers to success; and, 3) needed district level supports.

I used the theoretical framework of DisCrit to analyze the data to expand my knowledge and understanding the intersection of race and disability and how that has influenced the segregation of students in alternative programs. DisCrit was used to understand building level and district level barriers that contribute to structural discriminatory processes that impact the educational outcomes of minoritized students. According to Migliarini and Annamma (2019),
“DisCrit provides an opportunity to (re)organize classrooms, moving away from ‘fixing’ the individual – be it the student or the teacher-and shifting toward justice” (para. 1).

During this process and to understand the purpose and meaning reported by the participants, I analyzed the themes that I generated to ensure that participants’ experiences, perceptions, and insight were clearly represented (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Thematic Coding Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Promising Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Rapport Building: Listening to Counter Narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mental Heath Supports: Incorporating Social Emitional Learning (SEL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexibility in Alternative Programming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Obstacles and Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Building Level Obstacles: Lack of Entrance, Exit and Transition Criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• District Level Obstacles: Limited Investment in Student Outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Social Injustice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overrepresentation of Marginalized Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the thematic coding process, I uncovered three themes: 1) promising practices; 2) obstacles and barriers to successful reintegration to less restrictive settings; and, 3) social injustices. The data also revealed several sub-themes describing the participants’ lived experiences and perspectives regarding successful practices and barriers to educating students with ED at G. Willow while preparing them to transition to less restrictive educational settings. Sub-themes were derived from the teacher phenomenological interviews.

**Ethical Considerations**
Prior to soliciting participants and collecting data, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Training and secured a certification validating that I would employ ethically sound research practices throughout the research process. In carrying out this study I was conscientious, cautious, and diligent in ensuring all ethical guidelines were followed. All approvals and consents were obtained prior to conducting research and collecting data. Participant identity and data were protected and secured on a password-encrypted laptop secured in my home. Hard copies of all data were collected and stored in a locked file cabinet. The data included, but were not limited to, audio recordings of interviews, a journal with my researcher memos, and other records or documents obtained in the course of my research. Additionally, the school and participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Research Positionality and Delimitations

The topic for this research was derived not only from my professional experience as an urban educator witnessing the struggles that minoritized students face in a traditional educational setting but also as a member of the Oneida Indian Nation Turtle Clan. My siblings and I are the first generation within our family to have the opportunity to attend college. My grandmother, Josephine Bred of the Oneida Indian Nation Turtle Clan, attended Hampton Normal Agricultural Institute. She was born on the Oneida Nation homelands in the early 1920s; the objective for Native American education at that time was assimilation into the dominant culture. The federal government believed the Indian’s system of values were expressed through their children and their traditional means of education. Native American children were often taken from their families and sent to boarding schools where the goal was to erase their cultural identity through forced assimilation. The federal government believed the quickest way to “civilize” the Indian
was through the children, as parental influence was considered an obstacle in assimilation efforts.

Students of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute were trained in vocational and industrial trades like carpentry for boys and housekeeping for girls. My grandmother never spoke of her time spent at boarding school and chose to settle in Syracuse, New York, instead of returning to her ancestral homelands. I remember asking my mother why my grandmother never spoke of her time spent at Hampton, she simply replied, “it wasn’t filled with good memories.” She cleaned homes for the wealthy of Syracuse and struggled financially her entire life. A child who once spoke Oneida had lost the ability to fluently speak her language and the connection to traditional practices, customs, and traditions of her people. Her formal education spent at Hampton did not prepare her to thrive off the reservation and, like so many who attended boarding schools, she failed to return to her traditional ways.

According to Bear (2008), for the tens of thousands of Native children that were forced to attend off reservation boarding schools the experience was “remembered as a time of abuse and desecration of culture (para.1). In the 1920s, the federal government commissioned a groundbreaking investigation into the outcome of government policies toward American Indians, including boarding schools. The report that followed, published in 1928, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (also called the Meriam Report after Lewis Meriam, who supervised the study), found that children at federal boarding schools were malnourished, overworked, harshly punished, and poorly educated (in Bear, 2008). Recently, the remains of 715 children were found buried at Marieval Indian Residential School in Canada that operated from 1899 to 1977. Chief Bobby Cameron remarked on the discovery of unmarked graves, “this was a crime against humanity, an assault on First Nations people. The only crime we ever committed as children was
being born Indigenous” (Reinstein, 2021, para. 4). Another tragic reminder of the history of abuse at the hands of the dominant culture that refused to accept Indigenous culture.

My grandmother’s experience with formal education is a familiar story of forced assimilation. History, culture, traditions of Native American students all but lost to a formal educational system valuing only the dominant culture that failed to recognize or tolerate the rich history and culture of the Indigenous people. My grandmother used to refer to the Oneida people as the forgotten people. The problem of American Indian Education parallels so many marginalized populations that have been wrought with resistance and oppression from the dominant culture. I believe that Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter said it best when he stated, “we believe that education is a benefit that knows no bounds and is key to our self-determination” (Halbritter, 2010, p.5).

As an educator I am familiar with the impact that a traditional educational system has on one’s educational path and post-secondary outcomes. I am aware of the struggles that have plagued minoritized people throughout the history of traditional educational practices and my own social location; I will remain cognizant of this throughout the research process. At the same time my positioning as a special educator and administrator affords me access to the research site, my positioning will also help me be attuned to particular ways that multiply minoritized students with disabilities are often seen through a deficit lens or how segregation is often rationalized by the need for oppressed groups to assimilate into white, middle class, and ableist norms of behavior and/or achievement.

Chapter Summary

This study explored the pedagogical practices of experienced special education teachers working with students with ED in an alternative school setting. Participants shared their
experiences and interpretation of teaching and supporting students placed in the most restrictive setting in this urban district. Data was focused on two critical points: placement into an alternative program and preparation for transition back to less restrictive educational settings. In this chapter I described my rationale for selecting a qualitative research method design. Research procedures for data collection, participant selection, and data analysis were also described, along with a statement about my positionality and how this might influence the research.

Chapter 4, 5 and 6 presents findings, results, and interpretations compiled primarily from interviews and notes collected in reflective journals. Chapter 4 will present the findings under the theme of promising practices; chapter 5 will present findings related to obstacles and barriers to successful reintegration to less restrictive settings and chapter 6 will discuss social injustices that marginalized students encounter. Chapter 7 provides a general overview of the findings, possible implications, and suggestions for future research. In summary, the goal of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore and understand from the perspective of special education teachers’ pedagogical practices that have been deemed effecting in fostering positive student outcomes. Additionally, interviews with special education teachers working with students with ED provided insight into the district and building level barriers and high leverage practices that alternative programs encounter with implementing a school designed to meet the diverse needs of students who are placed there and when planning to transition students to a less restrictive setting.
Chapter 4

Promising Practices

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to understand the perceptions of special education teachers working with students with ED in an alternative school setting. This study focused on seven special education teachers’ perceptions, experiences and their understanding of successful pedagogical practices and barriers to successful implementation of the school’s mission. Participant interviews provided insight into the experiences of marginalized students placed in the most restrictive setting in this urban district. Guided by three broad research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with special education teachers to identify, from their perspectives, the schools’ ability to provide supports and services required to effectively meet the diverse, ever-changing needs of students with ED removed from less restrictive educational settings.

It is essential to understand how the intersections of race and disability contribute to the overrepresentation and disproportionate placement of students in alternative programs. DisCrit looks at ways in which race and dis/ability intersect and promote educational inequities for disenfranchised students. The theoretical framework of DisCrit specifically, Tenet 1 provided the context for understanding how race and dis/ability were co-constructed in the data and contributed to educational inequities and segregation of minoritized students in this particular alternative program. Furthermore, answers to research questions were read in relation to Tenet 1 to gain a deeper understanding of how subgroups of students are simultaneously raced and dis/abled perpetuating educational inequities. According to Connor et al. (2016), Tenet 1 of DisCrit “focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normality” (p. 19).
The first theme “promising practices” has three sub-themes: rapport building, mental health supports, and flexibility in programming. Participants drew on their lived experiences to talk about the pedagogical and alternative programming practices that they deemed most effective in working with students with ED who were placed in one of the most restrictive settings in this urban district. Figure 3 displays the theme of promising practices and the sub-themes I identified during the data analysis process.

**Figure 3**

*Theme One: Promising Practices and Sub-Themes (Rapport Building, SEL Instruction and Flexibility in Programming)*

Research question one asked special education teachers to define successful practices for students with whom they work. Additionally, they were asked to provide insight about a student they felt good about in terms of how they were able to meet their needs as a special education teacher. Answers to research question one provided insight into successful instructional practices working with students with ED.

**Promising Pedagogical Practices**

Although the goal of G. Willow is to provide students with specialized psycho-educational programming in order to prepare them for a smooth transition to regular school settings, findings revealed significant programmatic challenges in meeting the mission of this program. Despite challenges, findings also revealed several promising pedagogical and
programming practices that teachers viewed as most effective in meeting students’ individual needs. When teachers were asked how to define successful practices for the students you work with, participants mentioned instructional, social-emotional, and other elements of their programming that they have found successful working with students.

While effective instruction is important for all students, it is even more important for marginalized students in alternative programs. Alternative schools and programs effectiveness vary in terms of student outcomes, but often students in these settings experience lower academic success rates and lower graduation rates (Addis et al., 2020). Access to equitable educational opportunities is a pathway to positive student outcomes and expanded life opportunities for all students. Yet, the history of educational inequities impacts students with disabilities, particularly those from minority backgrounds, at disproportionate rates, further limiting their chances for success. Teachers in the study underscored how schools directly impact student learning and a sense of belonging but, stressed that schools are most successful when they function as a community. Students who feel that their teachers understand and care about them experience more success in terms of educational outcomes.

**Rapport Building: Listening to Counter Narratives**

Participants provided unique insights into effective pedagogical practices that they deemed successful in facilitating students’ active engagement with classroom instruction and acquisition of academic and social emotional skills. Throughout the interviews participants often talked about a blend of academic and social-emotional supports, and the importance of rapport building as essential to preparing students to transition to less restrictive settings. Samantha, for instance, stated that, “successful practices include students’ ability to self-regulate and access curriculum no matter their access level. Individual need is key to understanding and being able to
create successful practices for students with ED.” In other words, Samantha communicated the importance not only of teaching necessary skills but also getting to know students as individuals. She defined successful practices as teaching students how to manage their emotions and impulses as a necessary tool to help them better engage with instruction.

Participants articulated their role in fostering student success by keeping the individual student at the center of their planning and working to resist the dominant culture’s view of students placed in these settings. They also noted that students with ED often needed more social, emotional, and behavioral supports and interventions than typical students. Ashley added:

- you're taking care of four or five younger brothers, and you didn't eat because the [little] kids ate, and there was nothing left over. I'd be frustrated too, and I'd be tired…probably sleeping in class. And I'm probably irritable because I'm starving and I'm tired. These are the things that don't get thought about when kids get sent to us is, are the kids’ Maslow's [hierarchy of needs] being taken care of? My main thing is when kids come to us, figure out if the kids' basic needs are being met because if they're not, the fact that they're coming to us is stupid. You've got to get those kids' basic needs met first because they're not going to do anything that you ask them to do until their basic needs are met: One of those is do they feel safe?

I can’t help but reflect that Ashley’s response is reflective of the trauma that some students are trying to manage whether in a typical school setting or alternative program. The importance of providing staff with the skills to utilize trauma informed practices is critical to student success and possibly remaining in a less restrictive setting. Ashley also discussed the importance of ensuring that students’ basic needs are met prior to pushing students or assessing them with standards-based content measures. Her insight reflects the importance of creating a culture and
climate in which students feel safe. Ashley’s perspective reminds us to presume competence and to plan instruction with students’ needs and circumstances at the forefront. Isabella, too, described a student who transitioned to the school with a reputation for being violent:

When Ella came, she didn't have any boundaries academically or socially. I don't want to put down the other program, but there just wasn't consistency, there wasn't structure. I think she was probably left alone a lot, but the big thing was people were just afraid of her. Once we put plans in place and she knew what the rules of the classroom were and they were reviewed every day, and that she knew that there was good consequences and bad consequences based on good behavior and bad behavior. And when she learned what that was—and that took a while. Also, everybody in the room was consistent.

When asked what made this student’s story different from other students, Isabella indicated that the sending school described Ella as challenging. A teacher at the sending school stated that:

Oh my gosh, she's the most difficult kid, she's just so aggressive. She's a nice kid, but she's going to beat you up every day and she's not going to listen, and she's going to want to do what she wants to do and it's really going to be a struggle.

Isabella’s insight is reflective of Hoge and Avila’s (2014) study and how teachers struggled in typical school settings to meet the challenge of educating students with behavioral challenges. Isabella ignored the narrative that was constructed for Ella and got to know her as an individual. This is important as it allowed Isabella to build a rapport with Ella, which opened the door to being able to work on social emotional goals and make academic progress. Isabella ignored the sending school’s narrative of Ella and she was able to enter her new classroom with a clean slate without the labels of “aggressive” or “difficult.”
Family engagement builds social capital and community, as well as provides opportunities for students. Empowering families to take an active role in the education of their child is crucial to student success. Ryan reflected on a student with whom he had worked not only in the classroom but also in finding an after-school job. In talking about the support, he was offering this student, Ryan stated:

I’m in the process of helping him get a job. Me and my wife have probably sent him a good ten opportunities. He’s always been responsive to me. His mom and him kept calling and texting me over this whole mess and for some reason he told me, God put me in his path.

Going above and beyond for this student made the student feel like this teacher was a divine intervention, rather than simply an adult who was invested in his success. The relationship that Ryan built with the parent helped to foster success. Additionally, when I asked Ryan why he felt he had such success with this student, he responded:

The way he [the student] explained it to me, and I never asked him, [but.] out of his own mouth he goes, “you treated me like an adult and expected a lot out of me. And with other students, you don’t put up with any crap.

Ryan’s approach to teaching communicated high expectations and holding students accountable. Despite Ryan being told by district level administration to “tone down his expectations,” he continues to see the potential in his students and challenge the deficit lens through which these students are often portrayed. Ryan’s experience indicated the importance he placed on being willing to work alongside families to create learning experiences that are truly meaningful and transferable outside of school.
Olivia defined successful practices for the students that she works with as pedagogical practices “that engage the students but help you build that relationship with them at the same time so you can see their social and academic growth.” When asked about a student that she felt really good about in terms of being able to meet their needs as a teacher, she described a student that had experienced a lot of family trauma at a young age and the connection she had made with him:

I built a relationship with a student that I ended up having for quite a few years. When he came to me, he was very young and immature even for the age he was. He had not had a lot of loving attention from his family when he was very young. From reading the background and hearing the social history and things like that, he spent a lot of time alone in a crib and didn't learn how to self-soothe himself. When he first came to me, he, like I said, was really immature, almost, I don't want to say babyish, but he was still at that stage where he wanted to sit on my lap for every story or every instructional time that he needed that touch, that soothing even as an elementary student.

At the time of this research Olivia was teaching first and second grade; this student was in her classroom for both first and second grade. Olivia talks about reading the students social history and how he struggled to regulate his emotions and self-soothe. She elaborated on his need for social emotional supports and nurturing from adults in the classroom. She went on to describe the gains that he had made in the two years that she had him with managing stress and using coping strategies while in school. She went on to say that:

Working with him for a couple of years, building that relationship from that young age really helped him feel successful and want to do better and challenge himself even when things got a little tough for him and he wanted to have his outbursts or whatever. He
started to be able to use the strategies that we had been teaching him to either calm himself or let the outbursts not last as long as it previously did. By the time he left me, he was ready to almost go to a regular school and be successful there.

When I asked Olivia, what did it look like in terms of your ability as a teacher to reach this particular student she went on to say that, “in a classroom with small numbers I am able to stop when a student needs social emotional support and teach those skills. He made so many gains just in being able to use strategies to calm himself and not have outbursts and raise his hand to tell an adult he needed support”.

When asked if the student was able to transition to an LRE setting, Olivia replied, “not yet, I would love to see him do that, and I think from the work he has done at our school, he can, but there's a component of his whole life that prevents him from maintaining that success.”

When asked what component in the student’s life prevented him from maintaining success Olivia elaborated on his homelife and the impact that it had on his ability to successfully transition to an LRE. She went on to describe the lack of consistency with his mother sending him to school. She went on to explain that inconsistent attendance often hinders a students’ opportunity to transition to an LRE. Olivia explained that phone calls and home visits are made to encourage attendance but in this particular situation it did not have an impact on increasing his attendance. Olivia explained it was often difficult to reach mom and messages were more often than not returned.

When I asked Olivia why she chose to tell this students story in terms of identifying his story as successful even though he did not transition to an LRE she explained that “he was so dysregulated every day and would cry most days and could not communicate why he was feeling the way he was. By the end of first grade, he liked coming to school and would use the de-
escalation strategies that we had taught him to calm himself. Even though he didn’t leave the program he would come to school and was engaged most days.”

Samantha reflects on a student named Nate that she felt was successful despite building level obstacles in his way. Samantha describes Nate as a Black male that is classified as ED who has been in the program since he was in elementary school. Nate’s attendance was inconsistent and frequent phone calls to mom would usually help with getting him to school. At the time of the research Nate was in ninth grade. Samantha’s main concern for students was the inability to receive credits towards graduation requirements while placed in this program. Teachers in this program all have special education certification but none of the teachers in this program have additional subject area certification required to award credits. She went on to say that, “there are many cases where the program assisted students but many times the program only assisted specific students in specific content areas.” When I asked her to elaborate on “only assisted specific students in specific content areas she went on to explain that:

students that attend the program were able to get credits in physical education because the teacher was certified Prek-12, so students in high school would be able to obtain credits toward physical education credit requirements for graduation. On the other hand, students were not able to get the necessary social studies, science, math or ELA credits mandated by the state for graduation.

Additionally, Samantha explained that the program did not have a guidance counselor assigned to the building to review high school transcripts. She went on to describe Nate and his particular situation:

During the time in the program there were students like Nate who frequently was falling behind due to his lack of motivation and inability to focus on school. He had little
investment in school and new that he was not receiving the credits needed to graduate while at Willow. Nate was in the high school setting where the student was taking classes by non-content area teachers who could not award the students with regent’s level credits needed for graduation with a New York State Regents diploma. His mother complained about him not receiving credits and he was able to attend an alternative high school program within the district with certified content area teachers.

I asked her how he was able to attend that program and she stated that, “within a few weeks after the mother complained he was moved to the alternative high school with a CSE meeting.” She went on to say that she heard that he was doing a good job and was attending all of his classes.

Most of the participants defined successful practices as planning for and incorporating student social emotional and behavioral needs into their pedagogical practices. Sometimes this meant considering the child’s basic needs and other times it extended beyond the school day. The importance of fostering relationships with students and knowing their strengths and areas for growth were evident in fostering success. What was also evident throughout the interviews was the ability of the teachers to remain cognizant of how students may respond to “injustices” they may have experienced and their response as their teacher.

When Jack was asked if there was a student that he felt was successful or that he was able to help as their teacher, he identified a student named Aaron. Jack describes Aaron as a quiet student, that thrives with adult attention but has difficulty interacting with his peers. Jack indicated that Aaron is classified as ED, has a 1:1 assigned to him for safety reasons and was placed in the program for explosive outburst when he was in fourth grade. At the time of this interview Aron was in the sixth grade. Jack went on to say that he “struggled with maintaining peer relations and once in a conflict with a peer, he would perseverate on the situation until he
received adult mediation. Aaron would become so loud going back and forth with peers; it would often times frighten those that did not know him.” Jack stated that the main reason that he was placed in the program “was his tendency to leave the school and it was very difficult to get him to return. If the conflict persisted until dismissal a staff member would ride the bus home with him to make sure he was ok on the bus.” He went on to explain that when Aaron would leave the building his 1:1 and another staff member would follow him and encourage him to return. Jack stated that, “I think that it is very important to note that he was not a violent student, he was a kid that didn’t have the tools to address or unpack his frustration. He never went after an adult and it was rare if he had a physical altercation with another student.”

Jack explained that the reason he identifies Aaron as successful was the skill building that the social worker and he did while working with him. Aaron had a behavior intervention plan (BIP) which was followed throughout the day. His IEP provided counseling with the social worker to address how to effectively resolve conflict with peers. According to Jack, “working to provide Aaron with strategies required consistent planning and intervention in the area of skill streaming and on the spot de-escalation to reduce outburst and elopement from the school grounds. We worked with his moms to build a plan that worked both at home and school and this proved to be key in his success.” Jack went on to explain that his academics were only a grade level behind his typical peers and would do well academically in a typical setting.” Jack had built a relationship with his parents and eventually they began advocating for him to return to his sending school. Jack indicated the receiving school pushed back on the thought of a G. Willow student returning. Eventually, Aaron returned to an LRE but not to a typical class but a classroom that this “typical school” created called a transition classroom. Jack explains the transition classroom as a classroom for students who were transitioning from G Willow into a
typical school within Contemporary School District. This class was basically G Willow in a regular school segregated from typical classrooms. Although able to return to an LRE it was Aaron’s responsibility to “prove” he was worthy of being included in a typical classroom. When I asked Jack, what constitutes success he stated that “he was able to manage his frustration and was able to leave even though it is so disappointing that a transition classroom was created for students leaving G. Willow”.

Jamie discussed a student that was successful as a result of his drive to enter a less restrictive setting and the role that his adopted mother played in partnering and advocating for him to re-enter an LRE. What makes this students situation so different from most of the student that enter this program was the level of trauma that this student had endured from a young age. Jamie indicated that he was neglected by his birth mother who eventually lost custody of him. Jamie described Marc as follows:

There's one particular student in mind that I think of that struggled with, I would say, symptoms of his diagnosis of pervasive development disorder (PDD). Mark would get very stuck in his thinking. He was very rigid. He was not successful in traditional school and within our program and I would say that he was in our program for a while. Jamie went on to say that Mark was in the program for over five years and one thing that was constant was the active involvement of his adoptive mother (whom he referred to as Aunt Lacey) in his education. Jamie described Aunt Lacey as a “family friend that adopted him and was always available to come to the school when he was in crisis.” Jamie went on to describe the role of Aunt Lacey:

What was successful with him was, first and foremost, his caregiver, his guardian was absolutely involved in everything. She was okay with me texting her throughout the day.
Constant communication was absolutely the key. We designed a behavior plan for him at school, which she also then followed at home so that she would know every day before he got home how his day was. That communication was really pertinent.

The role of communication and collaboration was evident in Marc’s success. A behavior plan that was supported at home was key as it was built to support school and home positive behavior. The ability to collaborate with Aunt Lacey and communicate daily was crucial in Marc’s success. Jamie went on to elaborate on how Marc’s behaviors impacted his ability to return to a typical school:

The student, like I said, because of his inflexibility, sometimes he required a lot of patience and we really needed to give him a sense of control with choices that he had. He felt that control, but also helping him realize that there were certain rules and expectations that he needed to follow too. The student also I think struggled and his caregiver was they too struggled with his own sexuality and expressing himself, just feeling comfortable within a setting, being aware of that through adolescence as he was developing hormonally and just trying to figure out everything that's also going on with his diagnosis and what's going on with his past trauma, so needing to be able to have that.

Jamie discussed Marc’s struggle or uncertainty with his own gender identification and how having a clinical social worker assigned to him at the school for counseling helped him to work through some of it. Jamie explained what made this story different from most in terms of her ability to meet his needs and eventually successful transition to an LRE. Jamie describes it as follows:

Just to have that in mind when you're planning for him and planning for any crisis or problems that could come up. Just really being aware, insensitive to past trauma. I think
the biggest key was with, like I said, being consistent, giving him control with his behavior plan and having him function within a setting where he could earn things and be rewarded, but also was held accountable for some negative choices. He's really working with him to talk about his goals and what his ideal for himself was in the future. Always having that transition plan in mind and just being mindful of what the student's hopes and dreams are.

Jamie’s approach to planning for Marc’s transition always kept in the forefront the student’s past trauma and planning with that in mind. He had the student very much a part of planning for his own behavior plan and was aware of goals that he had set for himself. Marc’s successful transition was a combination of Jamie, Marc and his parent planning together with a goal of transitioning to an LRE in mind. Marc’s success was the comprehensive approach in planning the academic, social emotional and wraparound supports and services to prepare Marc for a successful transition.

Throughout the interview’s teachers expressed the importance of getting to know their students; several teachers provided examples of student’s frustration with this segregated setting and disappointment of not transitioning out. By working to understand why a student might be frustrated or angry teachers resisted master narratives that portrayed these students in a negative light. Despite students entering the program with a reputation or stigma from the sending school, teachers were mindful to allow each student a clean slate. Teacher interviews reflected how building relationships with students were essential to fostering their academic and social emotional growth. The programming at G. Willow was a combination of SEL instruction and academics throughout the day. All of the participants recognized the importance of incorporating both to student success.
Mental Health Supports: Incorporating Social Emotional Behavioral

Participants stressed that providing mental health and SEL supports throughout the day did not replace, but was as equally important as, planning and delivering academic core content. Some participants spoke about having SEL supports built into the schedule, but others reported that the schedule was not always followed and SEL was often left out or cut short depending upon the teacher. Samantha indicated that:

although I believe that students need more social emotional and behavioral instruction, we often are told that we only have a small window during the day to fit this into our schedule. Our students need SEL instruction to transition and, more importantly, remain in a typical school.

The pressure to focus on academics reflects the privileging of high stakes testing, which has contributed to the lack of focus on teaching self-regulation and coping strategies, despite the stated commitment to the mission of the program to prepare student through the use of social, emotional, behavioral and academic supports that require intensity beyond a typical school in order to prepare students to transition back to a LRE. This is such a shift from alternative programs that primarily focused on behavioral interventions for students placed there.

Beyond teachers providing SEL instruction, Isabella also discussed a growing need for additional supports from outside mental health providers:

All school districts really need to have that mental health piece where there is always a psychiatrist or psychologist on the premises for the mental health [needs of students]. Because the mental health just keeps getting greater and greater and we have more students that have the trauma, and they have the mental health [issues], and they have whatever has happened to them in the past, or the environment that they are in now.
Isabella reflected on the increased mental health and increased levels of trauma experienced by students she has worked with throughout her years of teaching. Her insight provides the need for additional supports to adequately support students in this setting. She went on to say that:

There is just so much ‘baggage.’ Let’s say that that they don’t know how to deal with it. And I think we need to address that mental health piece and this student brings me back to that mental health piece. He really needed so much more his home life was so screwed up his mom was in jail and dad had him but didn’t want him, I mean dad tried but then mom got out of jail then he went back to BOCES and was bouncing all over the place. I think it is just so hard for kids that are mentally ill.

Students are often judged by how well they can regulate their emotions, and teachers are critical in integrating SEL supports in the classroom even when they are dealing with extraordinary levels of stress, emotional abuse, or trauma. Teachers working with students who experience these kinds of trauma have a responsibility to integrate SEL supports in the classroom to help cope with trauma and difficult emotions. According to Frey, Fisher, and Smith, (2019), “[A] school that successfully weaves SEL into the fabric of its academic learning and its policies and procedures doesn’t get that way by chance. School leaders, staff, and families collaborate with intention to create these conditions” (p.13). All of the participants discussed their role in delivering SEL throughout the day, but none of the participants spoke to the blending of SEL into content.

Jack also reflected on the importance of meeting the diverse needs of students and utilizing interventions that included both academic and mental health supports. His approach to programming for students takes on a more systematic approach. Jack defined effective pedagogical practices as:
Successful practices for students that I work with support the academic and social emotional needs of the individual student. Typically, students that come into the program are already in need of interventions both academic and mental health supports. Students are supposed to have a behavior intervention plan (BIP) and planning for students would consider interventions for reducing any antecedents or triggers, while teaching replacement behaviors. Also, ensuring students have the appropriate academic interventions based on student data throughout the day. I consistently review student data and make sure that I am planning instruction and providing supports reflective of their needs.

Jack points out the importance of a student’s daily schedule that integrates academic and social emotional learning (SEL) opportunities, while implementing a students’ BIP. Jack’s view of planning instruction focusing on individual student data to drive instructional and social emotional behavioral interventions and supports fosters student success. He indicates the importance of implementing a students’ BIP and planning for academic and social emotional supports in fostering student growth and success. Similarly, Jamie reflected on the need for:

Mental health counseling within the school and as much as possible, in the classroom as well. When I worked with BOCES, within some of our specialized transition classrooms, we had a social worker embedded directly in the classroom. I know this isn't realistic for many schools to have that high need of support, but it was game-changing when we were there. Being able to constantly model and offer support to students on the spot was second to none. If it's not possible, again, to have a social worker embedded throughout the day, then each staff within the classroom really needs to be trained ongoing. And really, the staff need to want to be working with these types of students. Instruction-wise,
again, I said there needs to be the balance between the social emotional and the instruction. Teachers need to come in with the expectation and the belief that all students can do standards-based work, that all students and all learners, they're not defined by their disability and we must hold them instructionally to a high standard.

Jamie’s perspective reflects a mindset of presuming competence and rigorous instruction. Participants all agreed that mental health supports and SEL instruction were important components of programming for their students. Additionally, participants added that most of their students exhibit intensive instructional and behavioral management needs that require additional staff collaboration and support. Participants noted that the school had a full-time psychologist and three social workers to help provide support with social emotional and behavioral management strategies and counseling services, both individual and group, if indicated on students’ IEPs.

Overall, participants believed there were adequate supports at G. Willow, but defining roles and responsibilities was needed to maximize support to students. Additionally, all the participants felt that staff had to be appropriately trained to work in this setting. Isabella discussed students’ coming into the school that “have more and more trauma, more and more mental issues, more multiple disabilities, not just a learning disability but mental problems. I think that needs to be addressed.” Isabella went on to say that hiring psychiatrist that work with students that have experienced trauma has been beneficial in her experience as a special education teacher. She went on to discuss her experience with Dr. Smith:

I feel that the district needs to hire specific people that are trained in trauma like Dr. Smith. We need to have more people like Dr. Smith that can run these groups and have a major group, like I talked about. Like a social skill. Maybe on Monday, Wednesday,
Friday, these trained people are running three classes on Monday, three classes on Wednesday, three classes on Friday. Different kids are split up to put in these different classes based on their disabilities, based on their trauma. Then on Tuesday, Thursday, there could be follow-up in the classrooms with the teachers and the childcare workers, and the social workers, and the psychologist. I think there just needs to be more of a cohesiveness where everybody's working together as a team. I don't think that always happens.

Clearly the importance of meeting student needs and having staff who are able to provide support is crucial in preparing students to transition successfully. Isabella’s insight is indicative of providing students with targeted interventions and supports. Explicit teaching of SEL assists students with developing essential skills that promote positive school outcomes. Preparing students to transition back to less restrictive settings takes flexibility in programming and human capital. All the literature reflects the importance of blending academic and social emotional supports in a student’s schedule (Frey et al., 2019). Samantha indicated that there are benefits to students labeled with ED who attend alternative schools:

   Emotional disturbance is the [result of] extended trauma that leaves a lasting effect on a person, resulting in difficulty self-regulating. This can include emotional, mental, and physical regulation. While emotional disturbance can have a range of causes, the main cause that I have seen is extensive trauma that has imprinted on the individual. I think that in this setting we are aware of how trauma can impact a student and have staff who are trained to respond to students in crisis.

Samantha notes that having teachers who understand trauma and how students may respond in an educational setting is necessary and something that is often not available in less restrictive
settings. It was found that throughout the literature review students with ED were referred to alternative programs for challenging behaviors that typical schools felt they were unable to address successfully. Participant interviews reflected that teachers in typical schools did not have a solid understanding of the classification of ED and were not prepared to plan instruction or de-escalate situations in the classroom. Samantha suggests that teachers who employ trauma-informed practices benefit students and lead to better outcomes for students with ED labels. Having more teachers fluent in trauma-informed pedagogy and practices would help bridge this need across a range of settings and contribute to better transition outcomes.

All the special education teachers I spoke to stress the importance of taking the time to build relationships with students. Teachers indicated that it takes time, but once you have earned the trust and respect of students everything else becomes easier. Isabella reflected on the importance of building relationships and trust:

I think that we need to keep that in mind as educators that not every child learns the same way, not every child has the same ED, not every trick in your toolbox works on every kid. I think when you work with emotional disturbed kids, it's extremely difficult because. Typically, they can communicate what they don't want to because they have a trust factor there and they don't trust people, so for them to get the help that they need, it's very difficult for them because they don't trust people.

Participants were mindful of how students may respond to their situation and were thoughtful in their approach to building relationships. Jack discussed how he worked with a student who was resistant to all of his attempts to work with him. Jack described the student as a black male, who was in an out of foster care and then home again. Jack stated that:
He would come into school and take his seat and put his head down and fall asleep. I would greet him every day and encourage him to engage with peers and other adults. It took almost four months before he was saying good morning back to me and I was able to ask him questions about his likes and dislikes. He told me how he loved the Steelers and eventually we would talk throughout lunch about football. He stayed with me for the entire year and is now in high school. He has a tough life with very little adult consistency; I believe being there every day and never giving up on trying to get to know him helped me reach him. We have lunch once a week and he stop by almost every morning to say hello.

To many this may seem very miniscule in terms of effective teaching practices, but as a former teacher myself, Jack’s persistence and his ability to see a sense of urgency in getting to know this student made the difference in their ability to connect. Jack’s consistency eventually paid off and he was able to engage with the student both academically and on social level.

The need for consistent implementation of academic and mental health supports and promoting equity in delivery of supports and services was evident throughout participant interviews. It’s interesting to note that some participants admitted that SEL can sometimes take a back seat to instruction when there are pressures around high stakes testing and accountability. Yet, the fact that participants gave equal weight to instructional and SEL outcomes reflects a shift from past practices in which behavioral supports were given priority over instruction in ED classrooms and alternative programs. All of the participants discussed the importance of preparing students to return to an LRE. Participants all voiced the importance of a successful transition preparing students both academically, socially, emotionally and behaviorally as well.

Olivia discussed the importance of building academic stamina, “just building that time on task
for them to be successful in a regular building where they're not going to have as many supports as they do in our building.” All of the participants were aware that the academic demands in LRE are more demanding. Olivia reflected on preparing students to transition:

I would say with the academic piece, not necessarily giving them the level that they're supposed to be at because our district is just full of kids that are not completely on level but giving them to be able to be more independent in completing their work or asking for help or just getting through their school day without having that many emotional outbursts.

Olivia’s insight communicates the importance of teaching students how to self-regulate and manage their frustration, especially with academic demands. Her insight also reminds us of why most students are placed in alternative programs. Emotional outbursts were cited as one of the main reasons students with ED are segregated in alternative programs. Jamie reflected on the need to prepare students for an LRE and district expectations:

We have to let them know and we have to instill into the kids that they need to be accountable for their behaviors, they need to be accountable for their work, but we also have to find a balance between being flexible with the way we teach, being flexible with our instructional approaches, willingness to allow students for choice in their assignments, but also within the parameter of what the district expect instructionally to students in the combination of targeted intervention if they're not on grade level.

I think that it is important to note that all of the participants were aware of the need to teach students how to manage their behavior. The ability for teachers in this setting to focus on both academic and social emotional needs of their students may help to successfully transition
students to inclusive settings with their typical peers. All of the participants believed that the flexibility in this setting allowed them to focus on what individual students may need.

**Flexibility in Programming**

Alternative programs often have more flexibility when it comes to instructional and operational planning. The loose definition of how alternative programs should be organized can provide more opportunities to plan for individualized and meaningful instruction. Isabella reflected on her experience as a teacher working in alternative settings:

> In every alternative program that I've had, the kids have circle time, or they have a social skill time where a counselor comes in. Wherein Gen Ed schools they don't have that. They have their typical transition, you go to your math, you go to your reading, you go to your social studies. It's more robotic, there isn't that time for those social cue expectations.

Providing explicit instruction in social, emotional, and behavioral supports is conducive in a non-traditional school setting like alternative programs. The ability to program for what students need versus the normalizing practices in typical school settings of labeling a student “at-risk” because they don’t fit into normative cultural standards such as whiteness and ability is a benefit at G. Willow. All of the participants were aware of how students in this setting were marginalized; despite the obvious obstacle’s teachers continued to prepare their students for transitioning to a less restrictive setting.

Ashley reflected on the appeal of G. Willow and how the flexibility afforded to non-traditional schools can be used to meet the diverse needs of students placed there:

> This archaic concept of sit in your chair, read out of a textbook and do what I'm telling you to do, does not work for our kids anymore. It really hasn't worked for our kids
probably ever, but we have kinesthetic learners. We have kids that are auditory learners or visual learners, and we expect them all to do the same thing the same way.

Flexibility in programming can provide teachers with opportunities to plan for instructional opportunities that are innovative and appeal to non-traditional learners. According to participants, the goal of having such a high teacher-to-student ratio was to provide students support in mastering grade level learning standards and developing prosocial self-regulation strategies with the accommodations prescribed on their IEPs in a small class setting. Olivia shared that the flexibility of G. Willow provided opportunities to meet student needs:

I also think the advantage is that we have—we have the ability to really build those relationships better. And, even family-wise, the constant communication and staff working with the families collaboratively, I think, is a lot easier for us as a smaller program with the amount of people that we have supporting these children. It's sometimes a safe place for even the parents to come to talk through things, to get help themselves.

Olivia views the setting as more conducive to being able to connect with families and build relationships. Despite being the most restrictive placement in this district, Olivia views some positive attributes to this segregated setting. Olivia shared that small class size provided opportunities for staff to support students and families. It is not surprising that alternative programs face obstacles and barriers; however, the opportunity to foster meaningful relationships with students and families is easier in a smaller setting. Jamie also noted that non-traditional practices, geared towards meeting student sensory issues and incorporating movement breaks, were more feasible in a special education alternative school like G. Willow. Jamie stated:
I think, as teachers, if we can just design our instruction around some movement, having heavy sensory, even weighted input within the classroom throughout the day, I think so much more of that could be squashed early on. I think, like I said, as a system, we need to get better because too many, especially I do think too many young Black boys are being identified in special ed. I just think that in the educational system, we need to do a better job with that. With this building that I'm in now and as well as the specialized alternative programs throughout my 12 years of teaching, there has always been a much higher percentage of male students that I have seen.

Jamie defines successful practices as those that incorporate sensory and movement breaks throughout the day. He indicates that non-traditional approaches may help with the overidentification of Black males being placed in special education by creating a learning environment that fosters success. Teachers who engage with pedagogical practices that are responsive to individual student needs are more successful in fostering student academic and social emotional growth.

Jamie’s perspective supports the work of Quinn & Poirier (2007), in which a program philosophy fosters an educational approach to the individual student rather than a standard or traditional approach to teaching and learning. Jamie hints at district level barriers and an educational system that perpetuates the disenfranchisement of subgroups of students and ways that more supportive structures could help curb disproportionate numbers of students, particularly boys, of color being funneled into special education and alternative programs.

Thus, one of the advantages that G. Willow has is the ability to plan and implement academic and social emotional supports for individual students. Additionally, the ability to get to know their students and families was beneficial to student growth. Jamie reflected on having
more opportunities to support students in crisis. This could be due to the flexibility in programming that are not present in typical school settings. Jamie stated that:

I think that we're very blessed within our alternative program that there is more flexibility and understanding that our kids, they have different needs. Their emotionality or the trauma that they have experienced is going to come out and manifest in different ways. Within a typical day, we have to find that balance between just being able to meet them where they are. Within a typical school, there are more demands with getting through the curriculum in such a timeframe. In an alternative setting, we still have to have that academic demands but you also have to take-- If you need to take a few minutes out here and there and just be able to reset and work through some trigger or whatever that they're dealing with, I think there is just a little bit more understanding in an alternative setting.

The loose definition of defining characteristics allows educators to take on more of individualized approach to plan for academic and social emotional programming rather than driven by planning for delivering standards-based curriculum. What we might ask is how has the hyper-focus on standards-based curriculum and assessments of traditional education created a less hospitable place for students? How has this focus created a dumping ground for marginalized students?

Reflecting on participant responses of effective pedagogical practices is indicative of a building that is often ignored by the district. The ability of teachers to plan instruction and social emotional supports without the scrutiny of district level administration is evident. “In theory, there's a difference between a "standards-based curriculum" and a standardized curriculum. The former is meant to define what kids are expected to learn, but not how they get there, in theory giving teachers the flexibility to decide how to help kids there and leaving room for
individualizing instruction” (Shedd, 2021). All of the teachers discussed modifying grade level content so that students could engage with what students are expected to learn for their equivalent grade level. The teachers at G. Willow have the flexibility to plan instruction without district oversight. Despite the barriers posed from the lack of district level commitment to this program, teachers at G. Willow had flexibility to plan instructional and social emotional supports without district oversight and remained focused on preparing students to transition out.

Isabella articulates the role of the classroom staff in fostering successful practices. She reflects on the role that staff consistency has on student success:

A classroom that is consistent and [where] everybody needs to be on the same page. I think that you all need to support each other, and all believe in the same things for a classroom to run effectively academic-wise. I think certain people should have different roles. Like for example when the teacher is doing the instruction, I believe that it's very important for the teacher to continue with the instruction, regardless of what's happening within the classroom.

She described how having clear roles and responsibilities help in managing the classroom. She went on to describe what consistency would look like in a classroom when a student may be off task and how classroom staff should respond:

I would continue with my instructions for the students that were on task and doing what they needed to do and then my head TA, would step in and deal with the behavior that arose. Usually, it was typically with one kid. If it escalated more, then the child-care worker would step in. Otherwise, if you don't keep the instruction going, then chaos breaks out and it's just mayhem in the room, but then that social pieces, the students, they learn the routine of the classroom and they know that when things like that happen, that
they're so focused on their teacher and that's something that you start at the beginning of the year. It's a work in progress. Isabella defines success as clearly defined roles and responsibilities and classroom staff working together to meet student needs. Isabella believes that when a disruption breaks out her role is to continue teaching and let the staff de-escalate off task behaviors. She believes that stopping instruction may only add to off task behavior. She indicated that she debriefs daily with staff and follows up with students the following day to discuss off task behavior. I found her perspective interesting as most of the participants believed it was their role only to manage off task behavior. She went on to discuss how this approach empowers the adults in the room to manage or deter off task behavior and implement student behavioral plans.

Despite being held accountable by state standards to ensure students have access to grade level content, alternative programs still have some flexibility in delivering programmatic decisions. School districts are under pressure to close achievement gaps among underperforming subgroups of students. Students that are placed in alternative programs are often students that experience educational inequities and negative school outcomes at higher rates than their peers in less restrictive settings. This means that teachers are often having to help students get caught up on content that they may have missed, academic delays, and previously unmet learning needs. Teachers in this setting did not report feeling pressured by the district to raise student scores; a sense of disconnect from the district and sending schools was pervasive in all of the interviews.

It is important to note that all of the students that attend G. Willow are required to participate in state testing. Their scores are reported to their home school or the school in which they were previously placed. Successful pedagogical practices implemented in less restrictive settings may reduce the need for special education alternative schools and the disproportionate
placement of students in these segregated settings. It was evident through the interviews that effective practices consider the whole child, planning for social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. Teachers interviewed discussed the importance of planning for academic interventions, social emotional content, building relationships with students and families.

Participants believed that the schools need to do a better job at coordinating the supports to ensure students have access to the school social workers or psychologist at the same time they have good quality instruction. According to Frey et al. (2019), “It’s important to stress that social and emotional learning is about much more than developing kids who are nice to one another, cooperative in class and civically engaged. SEL is an equity issue” (p. 12). For the participants in this study, both SEL and academic instruction and supports were issues of equity and the way to balance both was through considering the whole child and supporting their individual needs and growth. Even though participants all exposed how students do not have the equitable access to educational opportunities that their peers in less restrictive settings have, participants did find G. Willow accommodating in terms of being able to program for what students may need rather than being required to follow a more standards-based approach. Teachers did not report they had formed a consensus on how to meet the individual needs of their students, but all reported the need for academic rigor and social emotional supports.

Chapter Summary

Phenomenological interviews of special education teachers’ experiences at G. Willow provide insight into the importance of pushing back against the master narratives that have worked to over represent multiply minoritized students in alternative programs and view them from a deficit lens. According to Annamma and Morrison (2018):
Engaging DisCrit resistance of multiply-marginalized students in education then, means (re)defining what is desired in the classroom and schools. Instead of forcing students into states of acquiescence, we must look for what unique practices and knowledges multiply-marginalized students of color bring to classrooms. (p. 4)

During the interviews, all the participants expressed that building relationships with students is central in being able to help them on their educational path. Small class size allowed for participants to build relationships with students and parents by fostering opportunities for trusting and collaborative relationships with families. The participants in this study believed that students in this program benefit from small teacher to student ratio in which they can receive the individual supports needed for academic and SEL growth.

All the teachers interviewed prioritized privileging the voices of marginalized students. Building a rapport with students and families, planning instructional practices that meet the needs of their students, viewing students as capable, and recognizing the inequities and resisting the master narratives that have disproportionately placed students in this program were defined as effective pedagogical practices. What resonated with me was the ability of the teachers in this setting to be cognizant of student responses to injustice and how that may manifest itself in the classroom. Teachers were consistently planning for instructional and social emotional supports to meet student needs and connected with them as individuals.
Chapter 5

Obstacles and Barriers

The findings from the phenomenological interviews of seven special education teachers revealed significant building and district level obstacles and barriers to successfully transitioning students to less restrictive settings once placed in this alternative program. All the participants noted how building level obstacles could impact a student’s ability to transition to less restrictive settings and determine whether equitable access to educational opportunities were afforded to particular students. DisCrit provides a framework for identifying how race and ability impact educational outcomes both in the present and historically.

Race and ability are socially constructed in tandem, such that “racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 6). In other words, each oppressive structure relies upon the perception of the other. Racial hierarchy is a social construct and works to legitimize racial inequalities that is pervasive in special education practices (Connor et al., 2016). DisCrit, thus, seeks to understand entrenched inequities in our educational system and how these inequities have been fueled and supported by the legal system and social processes, including the provision of special education services. Regardless of ways that teachers within this school seek to provide equitable educational opportunities and a supportive learning environment, the overrepresentation of minority students in the most segregated setting in this urban district points to the inequitable access to educational opportunities and denial of rights of subgroups of students.

Alternative programs were originally intended to meet the needs of students that could not be met in a typical school setting (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). The stated goal of this particular segregated setting is to prepare students to return to a typical school setting. The
program focuses on providing social, emotional, behavioral, and academic interventions with a small teacher to student ratio, which are seen as helping to prepare and return students to more inclusive settings.

Throughout the literature review and teacher interviews it was evident that the stated aim of returning students to LRE settings is often met with resistance from the receiving schools. The ways that schools and the larger society perpetuate hegemonic notions of normalcy contributes to the disproportionate placement of marginalized students in these settings. According to Mendoza, Paguya & Gutierrez (2016), educational inequities are facilitated by beliefs about “race, and racialized communities, which facilitate human interactions and relationships within educational milieus” (p.71). The theoretical framework of DisCrit helps us to underscore how race and dis/ability contribute to educational inequities as a social justice issue. Figure 4 lists the obstacles and barriers, both building-level and district-level, that teachers in the study encountered preparing students to transition back to less restrictive settings.

**Figure 4**

*Theme Two: Obstacles and Barriers and Sub-Themes (Building Level and District Level Level)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Promising Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Rapport Building: Listening to Counter Narratives</td>
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<td>• Mental Health Supports: Incorporating SEL</td>
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<td>• Flexibility in Alternative Programming</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Obstacles and Barriers</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Building Level Obstacles: Lack of Entrance, Exit and Transition Criteria</td>
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<td>• District Level Obstacles: Limited Investment in Student Outcomes</td>
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<th>Theme: Social Injustice</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Stigma</td>
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<td>• Overrepresentation of Marginalized Students</td>
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Building Level Barriers Impacting Student Reintegration to Less Restrictive Settings

The seven teachers interviewed for this study shared that the current programming fails to meet the mission and vision of G. Willow to prepare students to return to a less restrictive setting. All the participants expressed a lack of direction from building and district level administration in communicating policies and procedures to staff or setting clear expectations in terms of programming and fulfilling the mission of the program. When asked if most of her colleagues in other schools understand or are aware of the mission or vision of this program, Olivia reflected, “oh absolutely not, they do not even know what the mission is or anything about our program.” The lack of commitment to and direction of district and building level administration in prioritizing the fulfillment of the mission of this program calls into question the role that district administration plays in the reproduction of racial inequities. Jamie stated that:

I think it's hard to define our program. I think comorbidity rates are very high, the students that have more than one presenting disability. I think we see a lot of our students that now are coming to us with some conduct disorder challenges. There is a very specific approach needed to work with students that display those types of behavior as opposed to students that are really, truly struggling with mental illness. I think within our building, as a small building to go up from kindergarten to grade 12, trying to define what our goal is as a building, I think that sometimes, students are just placed with us.

Jamie’s reflection about placement decisions provides insight into the lack of clear criteria for entrance into this program. G. Willow’s student population is comprised of 54 students, 43 are male and 67 percent are students of color. Despite the mission of this program to prepare students with ED to transition to regular school; students placed there have a range of disability labels. There are 2 students with Autism, 2 students with LD, 4 students with MD, 16 students
with OHI, and 30 students with ED. Throughout the interviews and review of the literature the importance of placement decisions of staff further supports the need for highly skilled staff and on-going professional development opportunities to meet the diverse needs of students (Annamma, 2014). Participants shared that students were often not provided the opportunity to transition despite teachers at G. Willow advocating for them to return to a less restrictive setting. Teachers interviewed discussed how G. Willow was often left off professional development opportunities that typical schools in the district were participating in. It was evident from participant interviews that building, and district level barriers contributed to the segregation of marginalized students. For instance, teachers revealed that lack of clear entrance, exit and transition process ultimately worked to keep marginalized students sequestered in segregated settings.

My second research question asked participants to reflect on what they viewed as barriers to students transitioning back to more inclusive settings. To further explicate this issue, I asked participants to talk about a student who they felt that we or the system failed. Responses to these questions provided on-the-ground insights into the districts lack of commitment to fulfilling the mission of this program to prepare and transition students out.

**Entrance, Exit, Transition Criteria**

Often the default academic track for students who are deemed by school personal as struggling or at risk in some ways is to place them in the lowest “track” or in a segregated special education classroom (Jung et al., 2019). Many students who end up in alternative programs first cycle through a number of increasingly restrictive placements or disciplinary sanctions on their way to a special segregated school. Throughout the interviews it was apparent that those that were interviewed lacked a clear definition of entrance criteria for placement at G Willow.
Additionally, participants believed that the lack of support from building and district administration acted as a barrier to students transitioning out of the program. Most of the participants were unable to define any clear entrance or exit criteria for their program. Jack stated:

It seems to change depending on who is placing students. I am not entirely clear on what would qualify a student for entrance or exit. I know that I track student data and report out at SIT meetings. I have made recommendations for students to leave the program in the past and some have left, and some students have stayed with no real explanation as to why.

Jack’s insight reinforces research conducted by Hoge et al. (2014) that shows that alternative settings are often quite isolated from the larger district. The receiving schools seems to be unaware of programming characteristics and how to best support students returning from these segregated settings. The lack of understanding from sending schools fosters a lack of connectedness which further isolates programs like G. Willow.

In addition to not being aware of any set criteria for why a student would be placed at G. Willow, teachers also believed that the lack of systematic procedures and protocols for entrance, exit, and transition also added to the subjective nature of placement into what is one of the most restrictive settings in this district. Lack of clarity also served as a gatekeeper, making it difficult to successfully advocate for students to be able to transition back out. Ashley stated, “but this most recent year, I switched districts, so this is my first year at Willow. The school that I am at surprised me by not having a system by which students enter and then exit the special education alternative program.” Ashley compared this setting to other schools she has taught in and was taken aback at the lack of measurable means by which students are deemed appropriate for
placement and ready to reintegrate to less restrictive settings. She went on to say that she feels student placement is based more on opinion as opposed to looking at individual student data. Her insight is indicative of the literature questioning accountability measures for alternative settings. Ashley went on to say that:

Over my entire teaching career, I have never experienced that each of my schools have had a very specific set of criteria by which a student enters the program that makes them eligible to enter the program and eligible to exit. This school seems to be based on opinion as opposed to data. So, it has been a very interesting year.

Ashley’s perspective is that criteria are similar to the subjective nature of classifying students as ED. Ashley reflected on the process for placement:

We don't have any [criteria], and that's the problem. That is one of the major issues within this program. We have students that are entering the program that are not appropriate for the program. Then we have students that are either exiting the program too soon or not exiting the program. And then are… [some students who are here] too long…., which is also not good for them. These alternative programs are not meant for kiddos to graduate from. They're meant for kiddos to work towards a goal and build their social skills and their ability to kind of work through this. The kids who have the highest needs, they are super-high—if we are not able to truly help them, then it's our responsibility to find them a program that can help them.

Ashley clearly communicates the need for well-defined entrance and exit criteria. Many of the participants expressed concern over the disproportionate placement of Black males in this setting. Teacher interviews revealed that the subjective nature of the label of ED often factors into who ultimately gets labeled and placed in one of the most segregated settings in this district.
Isabella teaches middle school and of her eight students, five of those students are Black males. She stated, “sometimes I think that they don't know what to do with students. They just put them in a room because that's just where they feel that they should go even though they don't really...know where to put them. They call those the fishbowl.” Isabella brings about an interesting observation regarding placement decisions and the random placement of students into classrooms without clear criteria for placement decisions. The fishbowl was explained to me as students just swimming around aimlessly looking for a place to land. You can see from Isabella’s response a lack of confidence in administrative decisions, a sense of dropping students into classrooms without any consideration for individual student needs or process. Overall, participants believed there was no investment in student outcomes or accountability once students were placed.

Samantha shared, “at times, students were placed within the incorrect location or placement. This resulted in a regression of a student’s mental health or personal development as a student and person.” It became apparent throughout the interviews that participants felt that the lack of criteria for entrance or exiting the program made it difficult to determine when students were ready to transition a less restrictive educational setting. Additionally, Samantha reminds us that disproportionate labeling of students can lead to student regressing despite more supports and services. Ashley added:

Data is so important and really having that system by which we determine whether kids are ready to come or go from programs like these—those are imperative because deciding whether a child stays in a more restrictive setting or leaves should never be based on emotion. It should never be based on this is how I feel.
Ashley’s insight reflects the stigma and subjective nature of decision making in this district. Participants expressed that the lack of exit criteria also made it difficult to convince the receiving school that the student has made gains or was ready to return to their less restrictive setting. There was no district level support advocating for and holding receiving schools accountable, Ashley stated that:

    This is the data, this is how I collected the data. There’s very clear evidence that the child is doing well and ready, but as I said this school does not have that type of program. So, one can argue, look at all this data. But since the system isn’t there, it can tend to be lost on those who are making the decisions currently.

Despite building and district level barriers, teachers in this setting found a means to track data to demonstrate student readiness to transition. Students in this setting already face obstacles and barriers and by not having a clearly defined exit criteria only adds to the inequitable treatment of students in this setting. Ashley went on to talk about advocating for students to transition to less restrictive settings and how it is often not well received by district and/or building level administration:

    It depends on who I'm presenting to. There's always politics in education unfortunately. It also depends on the emotions of the people involved. I would say some days, it's received well. I would say, other days, if you must agree to what a person in charge is wanting to happen, it's not received well.

Decisions about who is worthy of accessing less restrictive settings often reveal racial hierarchies that are still present despite educational reform efforts. In other words, without clear guidelines, a student’s race and/or disability label can play a role in educator perceptions about their fit or readiness for more inclusive settings. DisCrit helps us to understand how the intersection of race
and ability shape notions of belonging and inclusion in school (Connor et al., 2016). Here, Ashley articulates how what she sees as “politics in education” and “emotions” affects some of our most marginalized students by denying them access to equitable educational opportunities.

Participants all reflected on the lack of exit criteria as an obstacle in a student’s successful transition to a more inclusive setting. They all believed that the lack of support from district level and building level administration contributed to students’ remaining in this segregated setting. Throughout the interview’s participants questioned: What kinds of progress should be tracked? How should progress be monitored? When should progress be reviewed? How should we determine transition readiness? All these unanswered questions acted as barriers for students to enter a less restrictive setting. According to Jung et al. (2019), special education has long been used as a system to segregate students. Interviews revealed that students often remain in this setting despite teachers advocating for them to return to less restrictive settings. Olivia stated that:

I think exit criteria is still a work in progress at this point in time. We are definitely trying to make it align more with other schools and their education policy and academic levels and things like that. Even with those things in place, sometimes yes obstacles come from either people higher up in the school or even some administrators who have been in the district so long that have a great reputation that tells downtown, we aren’t taking this kid, and then it causes a lot of chaos.

The stigma attached to alternative programs projects a deficit view of the students who are placed in them. Most of the participants were concerned that once a student is placed, there is a reluctance from the sending school to take a student back. The student in a sense is “out of sight, out of mind” and there is no accountability from the sending school to remain connected to the
student. Even more troubling is the lack of accountability from district level administration to ensure that students have equitable access to educational opportunities. Ryan reflected on his interactions with the district:

That's a sticking point for me from people from downtown because they always say one thing but they're behind the scenes. I know there's a lot of other people I've talked that have similar stories of how students have been boned over by the district.

Ryan articulated his frustration with the position that the district often takes on student transitions, adding how building level administrators often have a say in who can have access to their building:

I would say principals who have the ear of downtown primarily. They don't want the headaches of having [our] kids. They just don't want to have to deal with all the nonsense of having a "troubled kid" coming back and causing problems. It's paperwork, it's worried about a whole litany of other things. They [our students] always have a target on their back. Now, granted some kids probably shouldn't and can't return because they don't try to get their behavior under control or work with people, but those that do try should be afforded the opportunity to make a difference for themselves and others.

Teacher insight reflects a lack of investment from district administration that perpetuates a culture of exclusion. Also, Ryan points to a culture that places the burden on students to prove they are worthy of an LRE, which is counter to educational law that guarantees students to a FAPE in an LRE. Overall, participants regarded a lack of commitment by district level administration as a barrier to their students transitioning to more inclusive settings once placed. Participants provided insight into the lack of buy in from receiving schools to remain connected and/or follow a student transition plan in the event a student can transition out. Olivia added:
It's really hard to find teachers in the district that are willing to either follow the transition plan we've made for these kids or even just work with those kids the way they need to be worked with. And I know that some of that has to with the state of education as it is, because there is so much pressure on teachers with data and testing but, it really makes it hard to find the right place for these kids to go and be successful and stay successful without them being shipped back to us because they can’t make it.

The completion of a well thought out transition plan with appropriate tiered intervention and supports is critical to a student’s successful transition. Throughout the literature review transition planning that was well thought out was equated with successful transitions but more importantly students remaining in LRE. Jamie discussed the importance of creating a well thought out plan to prepare students for a transition:

I think, if possible, before they transition to a less restrictive setting, they need to know what that place looks like, what the structure of the school is, what the schedule is. Will they be allowed breaks? I think as much as we can prepare students for where they're going, like I said, as much as possible, that needs to be put into place.

Isabella discussed the need to prepare students to transition into a setting with more structure and more students:

They get a little bit more attention and their schedules and things might be more flexible than when they go to the less restricted environment. I think that that's part of the transition piece that needs to be put in there as you know to let them know, "Listen, hey, when you go to the school, there's going to be more kids." Let them know that they might not have all of that attention that they had when they were in the school that they were in
because at that time, that's what they needed but now they're ready for something greater, something more.

Isabella articulates the flexibility in programming although is beneficial it may hinder a student if not adequately prepared to adjust to an LRE setting with less flexibility. Overwhelmingly, participants believed that there was no formal approach to transitioning a student to less restrictive settings. This was an obstacle in successful transitions and provided receiving schools the opportunity to refute a student’s readiness. Receiving schools that are reluctant to accept a student will ultimately undermine access to and successful reintegration. Additionally, participants indicated that the stigma attached to the program and the students is also a barrier to successful transition out of the program. Isabella, for instance, indicated that an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality was pervasive:

I never hear from the sending school. All the kids that I've ever gotten, I've never heard from anybody once the child gets there. I've had to reach out and ask, send emails and ask questions on things. Then, they'll typically get back to me, but I've never had a sending school check on a student, [or] ask me, "Hey, do you need anything? What's going on? Can I help in any way?" Never had that happen.

Sending schools often fail to remain connected once a student is placed. Isabella states that to date she has not had a school reach out to her regarding a former student or offer any type of support. To the participants, this lack of coordination reflected a lack of interest in students once they were placed in the school. Once students were placed or “out of sight” participants felt the sending schools washed their hands of the students. Combined with the lack of clarity that the intention of this program is to prepare students to transition to more inclusive settings, sending schools did not necessarily buy in to the idea that G. Willow was meant to be a short-term
placement, not a permanent one. Lack of clarity and support from administration further adds to the push back from receiving schools. Additionally, Jamie discussed how students react to the disappointment of not being able to transition to a less restrictive setting:

By the time we either get them another placement [where] we think they’ll be successful, or we fix the emotional regression they get from…just knowing, oh I am going to this school, but then being told no you’re not. It sets them back little bit and by the time we get them ready again there is no opening in the district.

According to Annamma et al. (2013), “DisCrit renounces-imposed segregation and promotes an ethic of unqualified belonging and full inclusion in schools and society” (p. 15). The placement of marginalized students in segregated settings with very little opportunity for equitable access to educational opportunities equal to that of their non-disabled peers is a violation of a FAPE and LRE. Administrative barriers, like receiving schools stating they have no seats available cannot be justification for refusing student transition to LRE. Samantha stated:

One of the major barriers that I see as a hurdle for students to transition to a more inclusive setting is the lack of inclusive setting situations and opportunities. Students who are approaching the possibility of a more inclusive setting should be given opportunities to grow within an inclusive setting.

Participants spoke about the lack of opportunities for placement into less restrictive settings. This particular program offers no opportunities for inclusion, and students are completely isolated and segregated from their typical peers. Alternative programs, like the one in this study, are typically housed in separate buildings, and filled with students who have been deemed too difficult to educate in a typical school. Samantha communicates that one of the barriers to successful transition is the lack of access to more inclusive classrooms, an opportunity to be exposed to and
be a part of less restrictive settings. According to Ferri & Connor (2006), the intersection of race and dis/ability can have a profound impact on a student’s educational path and opportunities for inclusion.

When participants were asked, “what do you see as barriers to students reintegrating to more inclusive settings,” they stressed the importance of having procedures and protocols for systematic intake, exit, and transitioning of students to less restrictive settings. Participants believed that a lack of comprehensive planning commitment and investment in student outcomes from sending schools once students were placed were major barriers to student reintegration to less restrictive educational settings. Without clear criteria these decisions can be made in ways that disadvantage students who fail to embody white, Western cultural norms (Annamma, et al., 2013). The overrepresentation of marginalized students in this alternative program suggests that race informs perceived ability and goodness (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016) which inform placement decisions of minoritized students in segregated settings.

Participants felt as though “out of sight, out of mind” mentality was pervasive and that sending schools often did not want a student back once they were placed. All the participants believed that the reputation of this setting and the students who are placed there were subjected to a deficit view. Finally, the lack of comprehensive planning for entrance, exit, and transition criteria did little to dislodge the deficit views of the students, whereas clear criteria would have helped to provide a rationale to schools and school leaders who refused to allow students to transition out of alternative placements into more inclusive schools and placements.

**Recruiting and Retaining Special Education Teachers who are Highly Skilled**

Teachers discussed the lack of planning and recruitment for teachers to fill positions at G. Willow as a problem plaguing the program. There is no special training or additional
certification required for teaching in segregated settings like G. Willow. Isabella reflected on staff at G. Willow, “I don't think that all staff can handle the population that we have. I think that some try but I think that they lack an understanding about some skills that you have to have.” She went on to say, “I think everybody that's there cares about the children if they want to be there, because it's not an easy environment, but I don't think that everybody is trained.” Participants all believed that this school was often a place to dump students and staff who nobody else wants throughout the district, which supports the literature on alternative programs (Hoge & Avila, 2014).

Beyond specialized training, participants also discussed the need for recruitment of skilled staff who have a stated desire to teach students with ED in segregated settings. Isabella discussed her years of experience and working with staff who are placed in a program they did not ask to be part of, “I think it is a huge disservice, I think you need to place people in the programs that want to be there and have an understanding for it, not just a job”. She went on say that this school requires a higher skill set like staff who are trained in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention in Schools (TCIS). TCIS is a crisis prevention and intervention program created in 2013 at Cornell University. This program fosters a trauma sensitive approach in which staff are proactive in teaching students how to self-regulate their emotions in a therapeutic manner. The goal is to assist students in managing stressful situations by fostering explicit coping strategies with staff teaching students explicitly.

Samantha stated that, “at times, the system failed particular students due to the lack of compassion and training of staff” placed in the program. She went on to say, “I feel that it truly takes a unique individual to work with students with emotional disturbance.” Lack of training and careful recruitment results in teacher burnout and the need for continuous growth and
training. Yet, staff are often placed in these segregated settings without a choice. Olivia recalled, “I was told that I was low man on the totem pole even though I had 9 years at my previous school and had to move.” A national study conducted by Billingsley, Fall and Williams (2006), found that teachers hired to work with students with ED typically had fewer years of teaching experience and were less likely to have their teacher certification than those teaching in other areas. Olivia discussed her frustration with the placement process:

In terms of staffing, I would say the one thing that needs to change is that there needs to be a more selective way of finding people to work at the program that want to be there, that like those kinds of kids, that have the right background or experience, or even just heart [chuckles] to be there. Then, when it comes to just overall, I would have to say consistency or equity, or I'm not sure what it is, but I've just always been a very hard worker and sometimes it's very disheartening for me to see teachers who don't have any kids in their class with their feet up or lots of staff in their class where it could be spread out to places that need it. I don't know. I just feel there's not that consistency in equity across the whole building.

Olivia discussed thoughtful recruitment and selection of staff. She provides perspective on the importance of hiring special education teachers that want to teach students with ED that have the experience and “heart” and level of commitment to work in these settings. Administration needs to prioritize hiring staff for this program. She provides insight into the frustration when building administrators do not utilize all their staff to help throughout the building in terms of where staff can be assisting if they do not have students to work with on a particular day. Olivia stressed the importance of holding staff accountable and having all staff work together to meet student and
building needs. Jamie further stated that in addition to careful recruitment, staff would benefit from on-going professional development. Jamie stated:

I do believe that many of our staff are there, in our building and our alternative program are there because they really want to be-- That they believe in the program, that they have a special spot for our students. I think there needs to be some ongoing training, especially around commonly formed situations. I think that, especially within our setting, almost all our students have experienced trauma on some level. There absolutely needs to be ongoing support and training in that so that staff is prepared.

Jamie’s view of recruiting and retaining staff who believe in the program and really want to be there is an important factor in successful outcomes. He stated that most of the students have experienced trauma reiterating the importance of highly skilled staff. Ashley went on to say that she has always preferred settings like G. Willow and the students placed in them:

I have always requested to be at an alternative setting. It's the only type of setting that I have ever been at, and it's because-- Funny, everybody always says, "Oh, you must have the patience of a saint." Anybody who knows me will tell you that is not the case. I'm not a patient person. It doesn't have anything to do with patience when you teach any kids, it's about understanding. If you can understand where these kids are coming from, in any shape or form, and understand that behavior is a form of communication. Even if you're flipping a chair and telling me to ‘f’… myself, probably less about you being angry at me, and more about you trying to explain something to me that you don't have the vocabulary for, either in that moment or in general. It's my job to put the pieces together and figure out what the puzzle means. What's going on in this moment? Did I do
something? Because sometimes I did, and I might've not realized that I hit a trigger, or is there something going on outside of this?

The presumption that she must have the “patience of a saint” to work with students in a special education alternative setting is further proof of how society has constructed student worth and sense of belonging. The idea that you would have to be a saint to work with students in alternative settings further demonstrates how the dominant culture views them as difficult or unmanageable. Additionally, Ashley communicates the importance of understanding students and how they may respond to situations, rather than taking their behavior personally. Because this program is completely segregated however, there are fewer opportunities for Ashley and others to share their knowledge and expertise about how-to best support students who struggle with behavior.

When participants were asked “how did you end up teaching in this school?” Ryan stated, “well, my certification is special education and physical education, and it was the first job that came around, so I took it.” Ryan went on to say, “I stay because I like the challenge and I try to find a student every year to make a difference.” Ryan’s answer demonstrates the lack of targeted recruitment and selection of staff for this type of setting. Although his experience has been positive, and he enjoys teaching in this setting it appears that he took the first job he was offered with no consideration to the type of setting he was being placed in. Samantha also stated:

I ended up teaching here by placement following my completion of my teaching certificate and EdTPA. I stay because I know that I am making a difference and that I am helping to grow these students as individuals and as students. While there are difficult days and beyond understandable moments that happen, the good outweighs the difficult. The difficulty gives me space to grow as an educator and a person.
Although G. Willow is the most restrictive setting within this large district participants indicated that experience of staff was not always taken into consideration when placing teachers. For example, none of the teachers mentioned being asked whether they had any particular experience or training in working with students with complex behavior needs or ED. They were not required to attend any pre-placement trainings or workshops. Instead, most of the teachers seemed to have been placed due to lack of seniority or just taking an open position.

**District Level Obstacles Impacting Student Reintegration to LRE**

When participants were asked “what are the barriers or roadblocks to achieve the mission or purpose of G. Willow Alternative Program”, they all pointed to a lack of district level support or buy-in to fulfill the mission of preparing and returning students to less restrictive settings. Interviews revealed that teachers felt isolated from the district as a whole. Yet, the teachers believed that district level support and commitment to fulfilling the mission of the program was critical to successfully preparing students to transition to less restrictive settings. We might ask, why is it that the district was perceived as less invested in the school, the staff, and the students at the school? How are we to read this lack of investment? Special education alternative school settings are disproportionately representative of marginalized students, “Race and dis/ability have been used in tandem to marginalize particular groups in society” (Connor et al., 2016, p. 19). G. Willow Alternative Program has 54 students total and of those students 30 identify as Black, 18 are white and 6 are Hispanic. According to Fenton (2016), “disability is not one-dimensional neither is race or other socially subordinated categories” (p. 205).

DisCrit asks us to consider ways in which the same special education labels provides different educational opportunities or pathways for students of different races with the same label. For example, labeling a white student with a disability may result in more supports and
services in the general education classroom whereas for a student of color the same disability label may result in a segregated classroom setting with less access to educational supports and services (Annamma et al., 2013). Teachers were aware of both district and building level barriers within the Contemporary School District that reinforced the marginalization of students in this segregated setting, but was this disinvestment related to the students themselves?

**Limited Investment in Student Outcomes**

Teachers believed that the district demonstrated very little investment in student outcomes for subgroups of students at G. Willow. Ashley discussed the lack of commitment to student outcomes and overrepresentation of Black males in this setting,

There's no nice way to put it. We have a major, major disparity when you look at the number of students of color, particularly male students of color, but female students too, that are identified as having emotional behavioral disabilities. You sit a bunch of students together and say, "Sorry, you're really angry. You're all going to go to this school and be angry together." We're going to say that we're going to teach you social skills and sometimes you do. Now you've created a location. If you're not really careful with the teacher selection that you put in place and the environment that you create there, you're just creating a dumping ground for kids that feel like nobody wants them. We're basically telling our kids you're not necessary.

Ashley reflects on the overrepresentation of Black males and females in alternative settings and the impact it has on students disproportionately placed. She reiterates the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality and compares segregated settings to dumping grounds or creating a “location” for students that nobody wants. Ashley points out the importance of teacher selection and their role in creating a positive climate or one which promotes school failure. Olivia shared:
It oftentimes feels as though the district is disconnected from what is happening in our school. We are often left out of professional development opportunities that every other building in the district participates in. It feels as though we aren’t even part of this district at times.

The feeling of isolation from the larger district was a sentiment that was pervasive throughout the interviews. Olivia went on to say about district level support,

I feel like we only have their attention when we are challenging a student entering our program or advocating for a student to transition out. Questioning the appropriateness of placement for a student is a practice that needs to occur more often. Students entering the program need to be screened appropriately and meet an entrance criterion that is determined by specific criteria. We often have students administratively placed or transferred from schools within the district with no warning or intake.

Olivia’s comments represent the lack of buy in or support from district level administration to ensure students have equitable access to an education equal to that of their peers in less restrictive settings. It was apparent that all of the teachers interviewed felt as though a lack of “buy-in” from both district and building level administration acted as a barrier to students being placed in less restrictive settings. Challenging placement decisions is a practice that Olivia is advocating for in terms of ensuring that students are appropriately placed.

**Broken Promises: (Listening to the Counter Narratives)**

Participants were asked to reflect on a student that they felt the district or they as an educator had failed. Ryan reflected on a student who he believed the district failed by denying him access to a less restrictive setting; this student was a high school student, a black male classified as ED:
I believe that he had been kicked out of one high school—I don’t know the particulars, it’s been a while, but then he may have been kicked out of a second—again the particulars I’m foggy on. But he was supposed to leave us and somebody from the district came and told him no way in hell is he ever going to return to a school a regular school, because no one really wants him in their school. He got very emotional over that, he [the student] got upset and exhibited suicidal ideologies that eventually resulted in hospitalization.

This student’s experience screams of the blatant inequities and oppressive nature of segregated settings and the ways that district decisions can result in overt marginalization and perpetuate oppression. This student’s experience demonstrates how segregated settings are often used as “dumping grounds” for students who are deemed “less than” or viewed from a deficit lens. According to Annamma et al. (2013):

race and dis/ability figure into who is perceived as an ideal citizen, including who is allowed to represent or signify a nation, how nations pursue ‘building’ a strong, healthy population that is ready for competition in work and war, and ways nations seek to reproduce and expand. (p. 15)

In this case the student was responding to being denied the status of student and facing permanent banishment. Ryan, a seasoned special education teacher with over 30 years of teaching, experienced how district level obstacles and barriers could disrupt a student’s educational path and opportunities for success and lead to serious and longstanding repercussions. When asked if the student was ever able to leave the building, Ryan stated that:

No, he was put into the psych center and that’s the last I heard. He only had two people on his visitation list, his father and me. His father never told me, otherwise I would have
visited him. I lost track of him, I don’t know where he is or what’s up with him at this point.

This student was denied an opportunity to be included and his response to this social injustice points to how disenfranchised he must have felt to try and take his life. All the teachers interviewed believed that the lack of district level investment in student outcomes contributes to the failing of students. Ryan went on to say:

That was very, I would say highly annoying, because when I hear a lot of people from downtown say “We care about the students, this that and the other.” This memory always pops up to me. I’m like I really don’t think you really care. I think it’s more about the paycheck.

Ryan pointed to the “othering” of minoritized students by those in positions to successfully advocate for their inclusion or even sense of belonging. He went on to say that stories from his peers demonstrate the failure of administration to support students and to provide them with access to inclusive educational settings. In Ryan’s words students have been “boned over” or in other words failed by those in positions to help them the most.

When asked what would have made this situation turn out differently, he stated that “being treated like a human being that would be great and the opportunity to show that he can do it.” Ryan’s story about this particular student brings forth how the social construction of race and dis/ability often determines a students’ pathway and sense of belonging. I think the words that he chose to use to describe what would have made this situation different to be extremely telling. He provides us with insight that these students are treated as less than, disposable, not even human, with little to no opportunities to prove otherwise in a school culture that has already worked to marginalize them in the most segregated setting.
Jamie discussed a student named Harrison who he believes the district had failed by not providing opportunities to leave the program and learn alongside his typical peers. Jamie describes Harrison as a Black male that is classified as ED. Jamie stated that:

all his schooling has been at our program. In my opinion, I think that is such a disservice, because this is all the child knows. I think it's more at a district level that somewhere along the way, there should have been more of a push for the student to be able to experience something more difficult because now, this is all the student knows. As many wonderful qualities as our alternative program has, it's not a reality if students eventually want to be in a less restricted setting. I think the student has just learned very much how to adapt and manipulate the system. I don't like to use that word, but he's very savvy at maybe avoiding work or not going into crisis, but leaving the building, eloping, just taking on more of the negative connotations and the negative behaviors that are more typically allowed in an alternative program than in a different setting.

This interview made me wonder how G. Willow is being used to house or in a sense institutionalize and forget about certain students, rather than serve as they are intended as a short-term support for students in crisis. It also makes me question how a public-school district can place a student in one of the most segregated settings in first grade. Placing a student in a segregated setting from first to now sixth grade, having never had an opportunity to be educated with their typical peers is extremely problematic and is counter to the mission of this program. The mission of G. Willow does not state that students will be denied the opportunity to return to their sending school or be included with typical peers once placed. Jamie went on to add:

I just think that student doesn't understand what it's like to be in a classroom of 20 children. They have those opportunities and really, just the opportunities for the positive
peer pressure as opposed to just the negative behaviors that are often seen as accepted or cool by some of the kids within the alternative program. I think that the student, like I said, from kindergarten all the way through fifth grade, he just hasn't had the opportunities. I think that at the building level and at the district level, we've done him a disservice because this is all he knows right now at this point. He hasn't had those opportunities to kind of see that his behaviors aren't the way that he should be functioning.

Jamie went on to discuss how this student has been in a sense institutionalized as he was denied educational opportunities by keeping him in this segregated setting. According to Collins (2016), “once a disability label has been employed as a mechanism to remove children and youth considered “atypical” from the classroom, these children and youth are even at a greater risk of being pushed out of school all together” (p. 200). I believe that this statement supports the tendency for districts and sending schools to promote the segregation of students with ED in programs like G. Willow.

Olivia reflects on a student named William that she believes the system has failed both from a district and building level perspective, stating that, “I really think that the system is entangled”. When asked to elaborate on “entangled” Olivia described how the district puts students at G. Willow with “no plan, no real reason other than they don’t know what to do with them in a typical school. Once in the school we work with them and try our best to prepare them to re-enter a typical setting but have to fight with district to prove they are ready.” She went on to say that entangled is a good way to describe how “dysfunctional the relationship is with no real accountability being placed on the district for returning students to their sending school.”
Olivia explains William as a black male that is classified ADHD with ODD that entered the program in the first grade. She indicated that he is very loving and loves adult and peer attention. She went on to describe that “he was removed from his mothers’ care after allegations of abuse, but eventually she was able to get custody back.” Olivia goes on to describe her strained relationship with his mother and how that has impacted his progress:

Trying to get mom and keep mom involved and be our partner, but it's just such a rollercoaster with her. One day she loves us and we're the best school ever, and the next thing she's ready like come in to school and attack us physically. It's really hard to keep that social work or home connection because it's just so up and down.

Olivia stated that she has gone on several home visits with the social worker to connect with William’s mom, but it has not helped with building a working relationship with her. Olivia went on to say that in terms of programming “as a program we were unsuccessful in having a working relationship with his mother and therefore it resulted in not being able to plan for wrap-around services or social-emotional supports that could be supported at home as well.” Olivia describes her observation of William’s struggle with the tumultuous relationship between home and school:

He had a very rocky foundation when she came back into his life because he wasn't sure really who to believe. He knew he had love on both sides, the school and at home, but it was so at war with each other that he didn't know what to do. Because he was so comfortable and safe with me for so long, he definitely had a little bit of trouble leaving me, especially when she came back in the picture and everything, that foundation got so shaky that when we tried to move him and transition him even to another class in the
program, it just was very difficult for him to really maintain the success that he had had with me.

I asked Olivia to explain “he wasn’t sure really who to believe”, she explains that mom had a lot of trust issues with the school and she was angry for calls made to CPS. She would tell him not to trust your teachers”. Olivia stated that “he would come to school with bruises and as mandated reporters the social worker, administration and I would meet to discuss whether or not a call to CPS was appropriate. More often than not we made a call.” Olivia said that, “at times he would come to school angry at me or quiet and then would say things like my mom said don’t talk to you or you are liars. This would set him back and my ability to work with him because he would be struggling with this at times felt like a tug of war between home and school.” When I asked what contributed to the system failing William she responded that “the district has not supported us in our efforts to reach mom or encourage her to partner with us. We clearly needed more guidance on how to support this family."

When Samantha was asked about a student that she or the district had failed she discussed a brother and a sister that were both placed at G. Willow. Samantha explains the two students as white, both had experienced trauma and struggle regulating their emotions. Samantha explained that they arrived the same year; Robert was in second grade and his sister Leah was in first grade. Despite several years at G. Willow both continued to struggle academically and socially emotionally. Samantha stated that:

These siblings struggled with behavioral responses stemming from their living situations.
The brother in this sibling pair was understood to struggle with extreme mental illness with evidence of self-harm both within the school building and outside of the school day.
The sister also suffered with mental illness but to a lesser extent.
She went on to say that “at times it felt as though Robert may need a higher level of care and that we were not able to give him what he needed. He had an inconsolable cry that would tear at your heart strings that sounded so deep, like heart wrenching.” Samantha went on to add that “Leah rarely had meltdowns, but would come to school tired and often with head lice. It was very difficult to get hold of either parent.” Samantha indicated that the social worker would try to set up meetings with the parents to discuss wrap around support and a plan for school support with little success. Samantha added that:

The program, unfortunately, was not developed with many students in mind. Upon becoming a teacher within the program, it was understood that the program was a holding place for students who were too difficult or too extreme for other schools. The program had potential to assist them, however many times the program focused only on their behavioral outputs and not the reason for their behaviors.

When asked to elaborate on what was meant by “had the potential to assist them,” Samantha elaborated on the fact that the program as a therapeutic milieu may not be enough in terms of appropriate level of support for Robert. There was no program review to determine whether or not we were meeting Robert’s needs and what the options would look like for a higher level of care.” Samantha went on to explain that once becoming a teacher in the program it became clear that “this is a holding place for students the district feels is too difficult for typical schools to contain. The district does not want to send students to other programs outside the district. I have been told they don’t want to pay for students to leave our program outside the district.” When I asked what additional barriers or roadblocks may have contributed to the system failing these siblings, she indicated that it was a combination of lack of district and parental involvement.
Samantha’s insight makes me wonder what the reasoning for the lack of oversight from school district administration is. It makes me wonder if students are maybe needing more supports or a higher level of care what is the process for review. None of the teachers discussed a formal process for review. It appeared that students were placed with no set date for review.

When Isabella was asked to discuss a student that she or the district had failed she went on to describe a student named Jason that was classified as ED that struggled maintaining safe behavior. Isabella went on to state that:

We have more students that have the trauma, they have the mental health, they have whatever has happened to them in the past, or their environment that they're in now. There's just so much "baggage", let's say, that they have that they don't know how to deal with it, and I think that we really need to address that mental health piece. And, Jason brings me back to that mental health piece, where he really needed so much more. His home life was so screwed up. Mom was in jail, dad didn't want him, but he had him. Dad tried, and then mom got out of jail, and then he went back to jail, and then he went back to BOCES. He was just bouncing all over the place.

Isabella went on to say that, “he struggled daily in school and at home which led to frequent calls to CPEP (Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program) for evaluation. Isabella reflected, “it is evident that Jason needed more support in addressing all of the trauma and negative life experience that he has experienced.” Isabella expressed that the program was not set up to support students like Jason but would benefit from more intense mental health supports. She went on to add that:

I think it's really hard for those kids that are just so mentally ill. I don't necessarily know what would have been the right thing for Jason, but it just seems like everything that we
tried was not successful or it would be for maybe a week or two, and then it would be	right back to the way it was before. Sometimes I just think some kids can't handle school.
For multiple reasons, they can't handle it. I think maybe sometimes we do a disservice to
that, but I'm not sure how we could fix that, though, either.

It is clear from Isabella’s response that professional development is needed in the area of
supporting students with trauma and mental health needs. Additionally, programming that is
targeted at meeting individual student needs would support students both academically and
socially emotionally. When asked what programming look like for Jason, she indicated that:
Grade level content is always modified but he rarely participated even though he had a
1:1 to support him. As a classroom we have social emotional or SEL daily working on
social emotional skills. He also has the social worker that provides IEP counseling on
targeted skill deficits. His mom is supportive and participates as much as she can and
trusts the school to make decisions in his best interest.

Despite the level of support Jason was not successful throughout programming. Isabella reflected
on the obstacles and barriers that may have contributed to the system failing Jason. She stated
that:

I believe that if we are going to have students with acute needs like his, we need more
services and supports like a psychiatrist on staff. We need more training and staffing that
are experienced and skilled. Finally, other schools within our district have a health clinic
for students with a nurse practitioner. We do not have a health clinic and have been told
that students need to be a student in that school to access health services

When I asked Isabella why Willow did not have a health clinic, she responded that “I was told
that because we are a program and so small it wouldn’t be worth it to have one there. From my
experience one the barriers that students encounter is a way to get their medication and maybe a health clinic would help with that and medication management”. Isabella points to the lack of equitable access to health care or school clinic for students despite being housed in the most segregated setting in the district. Additionally, the need for more professional development in the area of mental health and access to a psychiatrist was also identified as a barrier to success. It is difficult to comprehend that students that have been deemed too difficult to contain in an LRE have less access to health care and staff who are more highly skilled than those in typical schools.

Ashley describes a seventh-grade student that she believes the district has failed for different reasons. She describes EJ as a Black male with a mental health diagnosis of ED and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). He was placed at G. Willow as a seventh grader from one of the district middle schools after numerous suspensions. Ashley stated that, “he comes to school maybe once every 10 to 12 days and often leaves immediately by running out of the building, usually trying to encourage one of his classmates to go along with him.” Ashley describes him as “well dressed, personable and street wise.” She stated that “it is difficult to assess where he is academically because he refuses to do any work. He prefers to talk about what he is doing “in the streets.” She went on to add that when he is redirected “he can become very upset and target the adult that is redirecting him often times resulting in EJ threatening the adult that redirected him. His mother is very supportive but said that she struggles with him at home as well. Ashley goes on to describe efforts to support EJ:

The community-based organizations that work with this child just can't seem to do anything for him. We can't seem to do anything for him, and he just ends up getting himself in more and more trouble. The other students that I can think of is constantly
getting caught up with the wrong people. He doesn't seem to have a great stability structure at home. Rather than giving the student boundaries at school, the student is kind of allowed to make their own terms and there's no real consequences to hold the student accountable. We didn't hold the student-- Well, we don't hold any of the students accountable for re-entry meetings or check-ins or things like that once they come back from a suspension.

Ashley described how EJ jumped off the back of the bus one afternoon by pulling the emergency door when it was stopped. Ashley said:

his mother was notified, and she went looking for EJ with the Vice Principal who picked her up. We were all looking for him for over three hours, me the Vice Principal, his mom and my program assistant. Two hours of looking we spotted with another kid that we did not recognize. When we approached him, he ran before we were able to talk with him. His mother said he would return home and that we should all go home.

Ashley was frustrated with the district’s response to EJ jumping off the bus and was told that his behavior was “connected to his disability” and would not have a consequence on the bus or at school. Ashley’s went on to describe another incident in which EJ had been upset with the social worker for calling his mother to say that he had left the building with another student. Ashley said that:

he went up to the social worker in the hall the following day screaming in her face she was a snitch. A male staff member went up to him and told him to go to class. He ended up going to class only after the male staff member put himself in-between EJ and the social worker. Later that day EJ ran up to the social worker and pushed her from behind knocking her to the floor. She was very upset but not hurt.
Ashley describes her frustration with the district for lack of support and guidance in disciplining students. She went on to say that “if they threaten staff or other students, it's just kind of, maybe it's a suspension, maybe it's not a big deal”. She describes the inconsistency from the district in addressing student violation of the Code of Conduct and feels that “the district often uses a student’s disability as a reason not to impose a consequence.” When asked what eventually ended up happening with EJ she stated that, “he continued to be chronically absent and things remained chaotic on the few days he did come to school. His mom remains supportive and tries to help as much as possible. EJ remains at G. Willow and I don’t see him leaving anytime soon.”

When asked to talk about a student that he believed the system had failed Jack stated that he “has many examples but a student named Paul on the Autism spectrum stands out.” Jack went on to say that “the Director of Special Education said that Aiden would only be at G. Willow for the summer and would return to his home school in the fall. She said that Paul’s behavior would be too much for this middle school to handle with summer school staff and our smaller class sizes would be better. She said that I would have support from the district Autism specialist as well”. Jack who teaches high school during the regular school year was teaching sixth and seventh when Paul was placed in his class. Jack went on to say that he had many concerns regarding the placement and that:

despite being a program that focuses on students with ED, Paul was placed in our program per the director of special education due to behavioral concerns and our small class sizes. I did reach out to the Autism specialist who worked with Aiden at his home school and she provided me with his IEP which showed that he was using the ULS framework in which I was not trained. And when I voiced my concerns, she stated that, Oh come on his mother has to work have some compassion”.

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The universal design for learning for students with autism (ULS) is a comprehensive curriculum that ties in the core curriculum and state standards. The ULS curriculum covers a broad range of skills but it still requires the content to be individualized. ULS is also an online curriculum, which requires a subscription. Jack went on to add that:

It is not like I was reluctant to add another student to my summer class; it was more that I knew that from experience students that were inappropriately placed do not have much success. I was not familiar with the ULS curriculum and only knew that those that teachers who have been trained have specialized training to deliver the content. Needless to say, that the only communication I had with the Autism specialist with the one conversation and she did not support Paul nor I throughout the entire summer.

Jack went on to describe Paul led throughout summer school with behaviors that were very difficult to manage while trying to teach seven other students. Jack stated that:

I worked hard trying to build a rapport with Paul, but it was difficult. He would get off the bus wanting to leave as soon as he arrived. Calling his mother only provided more stress to an already stressful situation. His mom worked at Dunkin Donuts and wasn’t always able to take my call, but would always call back. Mom didn’t have a car and would take the bus to come and get Paul at the end of the day. I can tell she was tired and was doing her very best. I tried to incorporate suggestions from his mom, and some worked like special snacks or free time in the computer lab. I did reach out to the Autism specialist with little success. Most days were spent eloping from the classroom or refusing to enter the classroom. One day when he ran from the classroom and entered an unlocked unoccupied classroom. When the TA tried to open the door, he slammed the
door on the teaching assistants arm requiring an emergency room visit. It ended up being badly bruised.

Jack elaborated on how the district had failed Paul, “he was placed in the wrong program, we could not meet his needs at G. Willow, and we were not provided any support with appropriate curriculum or support of the specialist within the district”. According to Jack, “the 1:1’s that were assigned to students at G. Willow were not able to help too much in terms of re-direction or instructional support. Although teaching assistants are familiar with students in the program and approaches to redirecting students with behavioral issues, were not successful with Paul. Jack indicated that the biggest obstacle was the lack of appropriate level of support from the district and Paul’s home school. We were not provided information on what his home school had done previous to placement at G. Willow for summer school. There was no meeting prior to his start at summer school. Jack went on to say that “I feel like Paul was dumped at G. Willow by the district. There was no thought put into how to best support and provide him or staff with what he needed to be successful.” When I asked Jack how the summer ended, he explained that:

It was decided after summer school that Paul would remain at G. Willow and not return to his homeschool. As you know I already was upset that he was placed here, but as teachers we don’t have much say and the mere questioning of appropriateness was met with the autism specialist telling me to have compassion that mom has to work. I often have parents say to me when I do call - Oh I thought when he/she went to that school, I wouldn’t get phone calls about their behavior or they won’t get suspended because they are at G. Willow. I am not quite sure what the district is communicating about this program.
When I asked Jack why the decision was made to keep Paul at Willow he said “well overall I was told his behavior made him appropriate for our school, but I believe it was his homeschool that wanted him to remain here as well as the autism specialist who was always called to support him. Jack points to the problem of the sending school’s reluctance to take students back once placed and the district lack of support for students to return. Throughout the interview’s participants questioned the true purpose of Willow. Participants seemed resigned to the fact that once a student was placed there was little opportunity to transition back to the sending school. If the district and sending school intended to return students back to an LRE, wouldn’t it make sense to map out a specific exit plan upon entry into the program?

**Equitable Access to District Resources**

Participants felt as though G. Willow was not provided equitable access to district resources like typical school settings receive in the district. Examples included access to intervention programs or highly trained staff who are skilled to work with students with significant mental health needs and desire to work in this setting. Participants also felt as though the lack of support and investment in the program reinforced the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality in terms of students who were enrolled at Willow.

The special education teachers described district level engagement and support as a key component to providing access to an education equal to that of their typical peers. Participants agreed that in order for this program to thrive in terms of fulfilling the original intention outlined in the district’s mission, there had to be more district buy-in and commitment to preparing students to transition out of the program. Olivia stated that:

There's lots of challenges. Sometimes I feel like the program is last on everybody's list when it comes to getting those academic materials or getting the supports from
downtown that we really should get in terms of materials or just PD or things like that. Of course, we're the first ones on the list when it comes to wanting to give us children that are causing other buildings problems, but it feels a lot like we're the end of the road in more ways than one, if that makes any sense.

Olivia points out the district level response to students and the school contributed to an inequitable education. The fact that the majority of students placed in alternative programs, like this one, are students of color meant that their experiences of marginalization was compounded by intersecting forms of oppression.

Participants all voiced their concern that there is a lack of equitable access to district resources such as intervention programs, academic coaches, textbooks, and staff who are deemed effective. Interviews revealed that participants wanted their students to have equitable access to supports and services that students in typical settings have access too. Jack stated:

Often times we have to ask for instructional resources; we often have to request from the district for the licensing or the code to get our students on intervention programs. Often the district will admit to forgetting to add us. This has happened to me several times throughout my career.

Students in the district are tiered according to academic and social emotional progress and or needs. The district has intervention programs or platforms that have been purchased for student and or building-wide use. In discussing these intervention programs, Jack went on to say, “not being added to district wide interventions only solidifies the exclusionary practices that keeps students in these settings.” In addition to intervention programs, Jack talked about how instructional coaches were also less available to teachers in this setting. This lack of instructional coaching and training ultimately hurt students:
One of the biggest obstacles facing the students are the teachers who have been in the building for 2, 10, 20, 30 years who continue to plan lessons that are not meeting student needs or fail to make connections with students. Staff need training and feedback on their current practice in order to improve. We share an instructional coach with two other buildings, most schools in our district have a full-time instructional coach. I think that having a full-time coach we could help our staff a lot more than we currently are.

Jack points out the inequities that students at G. Willow encounter when compared to less restrictive educational settings. The sharing of an instructional coach with two other buildings would be difficult in terms of providing feedback to teachers to further their professional growth and better meet student needs. Because students who are placed in highly restrictive settings often experience academic delays and require more academic supports, what would have been the rationale for the sharing of an instructional coach? It would be difficult to rationalize providing fewer academic coaches and limiting access to instructional programs for a population of students who are often behind academically due to a number of factors.

Ashley also shared her frustration with lack of effective staff and professional development for staff. She stated that:

They [alternative programs] tend to be like almost a dumping ground for staff. People get sent there that they want to fire…, but they want them to quit or that have been problematic. You get a mixture of people that really want to work with that population, or just place staff gets sent there because it's still a place that has openings. Or then you get this population of teachers who really don't want to be there and have been proven to not be effective, but the district is like, "Oh, they have tenure or whatever, and they can't get
If they weren't effective in their last location, they're certainly not going to be effective for the most high-need students.

Ashley wryly noted, “a lot of these programs are put into decrepit old buildings that were new when the primordial ooze began and are crumbling.” She also indicated that the district has a reputation for placing teachers in this school that other schools within the district have transferred out or pre-service teachers with very little experience working with students with ED. Across the interviews’ teachers voiced their concerns that students and staff did not have access to equitable to resources compared to those in typical schools.

**Chapter Summary**

The quality of alternative programming for students has been an area of concern for parents and educators that want to see students educated in inclusive environments. Students placed at G. Willow, who are disproportionately students of color, experience confounding forms of marginalization. DisCrit is concerned with the collusive nature of racial subordination and disability discrimination. It emphasizes the socially constructed nature of race and disability. Similarly, DisCrit recognizes the collusive nature of racism and ableism, which is made to appear natural or normal (Connor et al., 2016).

As I reflect on my collective experiences both from an educational lens and a professional viewpoint, I am aware how the social construction of race and disability further perpetuates the oppression and discrimination of minoritized students and students with disabilities. I am also aware of how special education is a vehicle for segregating students in more restrictive settings despite the Civil Rights Movements and Educational Reform efforts. The dominant culture has constructed race in a way that promotes a Eurocentric point of view. This view is often present in our classrooms which perpetuates a deficit model of thinking and
works to over-represent minority students in special education. Public school systems continue to operate with traditional values that promote the dominant cultures set of values and beliefs. My goal is to add to the body of research with hopes that promising practices can be translated to educate students in less restrictive settings.
Chapter 6

Social Injustice

Participants in this study believed that a lack of equitable access to district resources (discussed in Chapter Five) resulted in inequities for the most marginalized students. Inequity is the compounding impact of inequality over time (Radd, Generett, Goden & Theoharis, 2021, p. 47). Participants felt as though the district had access to significant resources, but there had been a lack of clear focus and direction for distributing and sharing of resources. Participants believed that this setting was often overlooked or looked down upon—making it feel like a dumping ground for both students who fit outside of the normative culture standards and staff who were not the most effective or skilled in working with students with emotional and behavioral support needs. These inequities resulted in limited access to resources that non-minoritized students in other schools in the district had. The belief that some individuals or groups are of less worth than others and can be treated in damaging, unfair, and unequal ways contradicts the first principle (the extent to which different groups of students receive equal access to resources) of social justice in a democratic society (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 166).

The intersection of race and disability factors into whose culture has capital and sets the stage for the segregation of students in alternative programs. The disproportionate placement of students of color in segregated settings like G. Willow is a social justice issue. According to Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent & Ball (2016), “special education has had the effect of remaking centuries old categories that treat people of color as less able, less deserving, and ultimately less human” (p. 54). Data for this chapter focuses on the third theme of social injustice, which is represented below in Figure 5.
The third series of questions began with asking the special education teachers to provide their own definition of ED. They were also asked to reflect on what students with the label of ED have in common, aside from the label. Additionally, teachers were asked to provide insight into how race, class, and culture factored into who is labeled with ED. Answers to research question three provided insight into how race and dis/ability factor into who is labeled ED and who is more likely to be placed in the most segregated classroom settings on the special education continuum.

The segregation and overrepresentation of marginalized students is an example of how the intersection of race and ability factor into who is deemed worthy of inclusion, which is a social justice issue.

**Stigma**

Although 46 years has passed since PL 94-142 mandated special education services for students identified with disabilities it too had served to disproportionately label Black students as ED. Ashley defined ED as:

It's such a broad spectrum because if you look at these kids, it's not really a cookie cutter definition even though we try to blanket it. That's such a dangerous thing because like I said, emotional disability is such a stigma that once you give a kid that label, people
immediately think of these kids as trouble and fighters, and the kid could be nothing like that. For me, I really think of ED students as those that just need a little extra, and it's my job to figure out what that extra is. It's just this kid has a puzzle and I need to figure out how to put the puzzle together.

All the teachers interviewed believed that the stigma or the deficit view attached to the students who are placed in this setting act as barriers for successful reintegration to less restrictive settings. Erving Goffman (1963) posed the question, “how does the stigmatized person respond to his situation?” (p.19). Teachers in this setting were aware of how stigma attached to their students ultimately denied them educational equity. Furthermore, teachers were motivated to listen to the counter narratives. Olivia shared that:

Unfortunately, our school has somewhat of a stigma when it comes to students that are leaving our building. Just the stigma, in general, gives the teachers and the rest of the district just a negative view of our students no matter how positive we talk about that and we show how much growth they've made, things like that. It's hard to find teachers in the district that are willing to either follow the transition plan that you've created for these kids or even just work with those kids the way that they need to be worked with. I know some of that has to do with the state of education as it is because there's so much pressure on teachers for data and testing and all those things. It makes it hard to find the right place for these kids to go and be successful and stay successful without being shipped back to us.

Students who are stigmatized have fewer opportunities, including access to more inclusive settings. Olivia points out how difficult it is to successfully transition students to typical schools and have support from teachers who are willing to follow a transition plan or just be agreeable to
work with students from G. Willow. Samantha discussed the label of ED and how that works as a deficit:

Students that attend the school are people; individuals each with their own upbringing, stories and futures. The key to the “label” is to get to know the person behind the label. Each student may have difficulties with self-regulation, but they are growing individuals that need love, guidance, and education. The building population is predominantly Black males.

It is evident that Samantha is aware of the inequities faced by students with the “label” of ED. She states that the building population is predominately black males which is representative of how the intersection of race and dis/ability factor into who is labeled and segregated from their typical peers. There is a total of 42 males and 12 females and of the total population of student’s 67 percent are black. Isabella reflected on the hierarchy within this district, “there's different statuses between the population of the alternative program and then in a regular classroom, a typical classroom.” She went on to discuss how this plays out for students in this setting and opportunities to be included:

I think part of the problem is that when students from our school are going to our least restricted school, I think that they come with a stereotype just because of the school that they're coming from. I think that people have a negative image or thought of that. Sometimes I feel like, the child doesn't have a fair start when they're going to the new school.

There is disproportionate representation of black male students at G. Willow and their opportunities for a successful transition are bleak. The lack of clear criteria for exiting and district level support contribute to educational inequities. According to Gillborn et al. (2016),
“special education has had the effect of remaking centuries old categories that treat people of color as less able, less deserving, and ultimately less human” (p. 54). There is no clearer example of treating students as “less able, less deserving or less human” than the overrepresentation of marginalized students in special education.

**Overrepresentation of Marginalized Students**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) once said of the term “at-risk,” which can also be applied to students given the label of ED, “we cannot saddle these babies at kindergarten with this label and expect them to proudly wear it for the next 13 years, and think well gee I don’t know why they aren’t doing good?” (para. 4). Isabella reflected on the population at G. Willow “it's mostly African American kids, but when you look at the autistic population, it's mostly white kids”. She went on to say that the label of ED is prevalent for Black students and questions the validity, “when they're labeled ED, sometimes I think that there's other things that are going on and maybe they don't know.” Many of the participants questioned the validity of the tests used to “label” students as ED. Ashley, specifically discussed how race factors into who is labeled. She noted that it was:

Black males. I shouldn't say just Black males, Black and Hispanic males above everything else. Occasionally Black and Hispanic females, [but] mostly Black males [are labeled with ED]. Part of that is because Black girls are often just portrayed as loud and bossy anyway, which is incorrect, but they don't get labeled as often. Black and Hispanic male seems to just be targeted almost as these angry young men that have to be "fixed."

Ashley talked about the portrayal of subgroups of students and how that often manifests in the special education process of labeling students and placing them in segregated locations. She went
on to discuss ways that responses to longstanding legacies of racism and discrimination are also pathologized in our culture. She stated:

I think if people really took the time to understand how deep… racism in this country goes, I think that they would understand. Well, I understand why there's anger there. It makes a lot of sense why there would be generations of anger there and maybe not be so fast to say, oh, it's a single kid. I also think that a lot of the kids that ended up with us also come from low socioeconomic families, and there's also anger there. It comes back to Maslow, your basic needs aren't being met because mom and dad have to work three jobs, so nobody's home.

I believe that Ashley brings forth an important point in that, it is somehow the student is seen as in need of fixing, not our approach to education or our societal responses to racism and inequity that need to be the focus. She also pointed out that as a society we lack the ability or desire to understand how far back racism goes in this county or how it factors into our responses to student behavior.

According to Baglieri (2016), “as long as schools rely on normative assessment and disability identification practices, they comply with a system that presumes inequity as a foregone conclusion” (p. 178). In the climate of racism and ableism, students of color will continue to be marginalized for not fitting normative standards. When asked, teachers in the study considered how race, class, culture, or gender factored into disproportionately labeling students with ED, Olivia stated that:

I would say in a combination of all of those [factors, including race, gender, class, or culture], because definitely boys just being more active in general has caused them to not be successful in a typical school setting. Race can, only because I feel that depending on
just the environment that those races are in, I think it has more to do with socio-economics than is race necessarily. But, unfortunately, the number of kids that are coming from those social-economic backgrounds are typically of one race or just a few races.

Olivia believes that race, class, and gender all factor into the overrepresentation of students in alternative programs. Reluctant to name race, she instead points to social class instead, but must acknowledge the disproportionate impact that poverty plays in communities of color. The intersection of race, social-economic background and gender of students often factor into identifying students for special education—leaving Black boys at particular risk for placement in special education. Jamie stated:

I think as I said as a system we need to get better because too many especially young Black boys are being identified in special education. And as a system, we need to do a better job with that. So, yes, within this building I am in now and any specialized alternative program throughout my 12 years of teaching, there has been a much higher percentage of male students that I have seen.

Participants spoke about the over identification of Black students being labeled as ED and placed in one of the most restrictive settings in this district. Disproportionate placement and lack of access to opportunities for inclusion is a social justice issue. Participants viewed this as a systematic barrier both district and building level. Jack reflected on his years of teaching and students who were placed in his classroom, adding:

I have only taught self-contained and I can tell you that over the years there has been far too many males, black males placed in my self-contained classroom with the label of ED. I think that as a district we need to get better at meeting student needs in the classroom
through instructional strategies targeted at meeting diverse learning needs and an approach to promoting positive behaviors; like PBIS (positive behavior intervention system). I do believe that race plays into who ultimately gets placed in the most restrictive setting in the district and these students ultimately experience limited opportunities to leave once placed.

Jack, like others I interviewed, could not ignore the reality of student demographics and ways that Black boys, in particular, were overrepresented in the program. They saw this as an issue of racism and failure of schools to adequately support multiply minoritized students. Furthermore, the role that the district has in perpetuating overrepresentation of students.

One participant, however, did not see the issue of overrepresentation of students of color, particularly Black boys as a problem of bias. Instead, Ryan stated:

I think across the spectrum, I would say it's a good work ethic or they lack a good work ethic. They [students of color] want everything done for them because it's also the way they want-- I don't want to use an umbrella statement, but a lot of the way they've been raised.

Here Ryan points to student characteristics, such as work ethic, as being a factor in overrepresentation. He also implicates families of students as root causes. Ryan is a seasoned teacher who has a traditional approach to classroom instruction. His response reflects deficit thinking—pointing to problems within the individual child or family as contributing to their being placed in a segregated setting.

Isabella responded to this question by considering whether disproportionality might be different in urban settings, where the majority of students are students of color. She thought, instead, that racial differences might have more to do with specific disability labels given to
students of color and White students. She also noted how [White] teachers, like herself, needed training in implicit bias. She stated that:

I don't know if it [race] really does [lead to disproportionality] because, well, being in the city, its mostly African American kids, but when you look at the autistic population, it's mostly White kids. So, I don't know if somebody's race plays into how they get labeled. I do think that some services are, maybe there's more for certain populations than there is for other populations, just because of the population that you're in. I do think that, especially in this one class that I'm doing, the social justice and culture, that I wasn't aware of my own biases. We took this bias quiz and it's something that I think that everybody has to go back and reevaluate because I think it depends on what's happening, or maybe you felt a certain way about, I don't know, something years ago, but now all of a sudden, you feel differently about that. Maybe you're more compassionate about it, you're more understanding about it, and I think that goes along with your experiences. I don't know if anything like culture or economic system or status plays into that. I think most districts try to reach everybody. I do feel that culture is something, though, that we need to look at a little bit more, understanding. I think like Johnathon’s family, their cultures are different, and I think that's the kind of stuff that we need to look at more and where kids come from. Did I answer that question?

Isabella’s response suggested that she believes that teaching in an urban district in which the majority of students are minorities would make it harder to question the overrepresentation of students of color in segregated settings—compared to districts that are more racially diverse. I found it extremely insightful that she mentions that it is mostly White kids who are labeled with autism. Students who are white tend to have more socially acceptable labels assigned to them.
Minoritized students are often assigned labels that have a negative stigma attached to them and are perceived as “less than.” I also feel that this response is indicative of insight into feeling that racism is something that fades in and out. Racism and ableism are omnipresent and the impact that it has on multiply minoritized students is long lasting and qualitatively different than what their white peers experience.

Participants spoke about the over identification of Black students being labeled as ED and placed in one of the most restrictive settings in this district. Disproportionate placement and lack of access to opportunities for inclusion is a social justice issue. Participants viewed this as a systematic barrier both district and building level. Jack’s comments reflected the need for more targeted professional development opportunities aimed at meeting the needs of diverse learners. He points out the lack of opportunities provided to students placed in a segregated setting and that race factors into segregation.

Participants provided insight into how the label of ED factors into who often ends up placed in one of the most restrictive settings in this urban district and how this placement and label also contributes to social injustice and marginalization of groups of students. Additionally, Samantha reflected on the label of ED and how that impacts every aspect of a student’s life:

The label tends to follow the generalization that black males are dangerous and frequently incarcerated within our local society. The labeling of students is a frustrating matter. As educators, I feel that we should do our best to interrupt the school to prison pipeline that is happening within our local community. This is not possible for all, but education is a key element for all individuals and needs to take place, no matter the hurdles that a student may encounter. It is our job as educators to work to find the best format to deliver instruction and in turn; education for ALL.
Samantha’s insight supports how race and dis/ability have been “used in tandem to marginalize particular groups in society” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). The labeling of black males as dangerous “reinforces the unmarked norms of whiteness and continues to shape the notions of normalcy” (Annamma et al., 2013, p.11). Traditional school systems reinforce social hierarchies through labeling of students and segregation practices. Insight from participants reinforce the importance of disrupting the structures of “normativity” produced in an ableist and racist society. These practices have led to the labeling and segregation of minority students and have fed the school to prison pipeline.

According to Annamma, Morrison and Jackson (2014), “school actions that label students as disruptive or disabled are the first step in the Pipeline, marking students as different from the norm and therefore problematic” (p. 214). When teachers were asked what it would take for things to change in terms of over-representation, Ashley stated:

I think we need to relook at how school is set up for our kids. This archaic concept of sit in your chair, read out of a textbook and do what I'm telling you to do, does not work for our kids anymore. It really hasn't worked for our kids probably ever, but we have kinesthetic learners. We have kids that are auditory learners or visual learners, and we expect them all to do the same thing the same way. I found just putting a yoga ball under a kid is helpful. Give a kid a kick belt. Give a kid fidget or have a kid stand or just pace in the back of the room while you're talking. Have a kid listen to an audiobook instead of reading it. There are so many different options of what we could be doing in our education system to accommodate our kids so that they don't end up feeling frustrated with the education system. We aren't even considering those things because we're so concerned about framing all this curriculum in, that we're not worried about making sure
that we're taking care of the whole kid. If we worry less about jamming it all in and making sure that they're understanding and being able to take it in, I think we would have less kiddos coming to us because we'd have less kiddos that we're feeling like this system doesn't care about me.

In other words, Ashley viewed her roles as an educator as providing access to the curriculum by differentiating content so all students can access and be successful. Additionally, she explained that traditional educational practices fail to reach students that require opportunities for hands on learning. Furthermore, instructional approaches that embrace more student-focused curriculum and pedagogy would be a way that schools could make learning more accessible and welcoming to all students. She saw this approach, as opposed to putting the onus of change on the individual student or their family, as connected to curbing disproportionality.

**Chapter Summary**

The findings of this study indicate that some special education teachers expressed deep concerns and identified several barriers that hinder student transition to less restrictive educational settings once placed at G. Willow. Findings are aligned with the literature, that suggest that many special education teachers and stakeholders are concerned with educational equity of marginalized students placed in these settings.

According to Fergus (2016), “institutions are more than simply sterile and objective arenas, but rather environments latent with connected cultural understandings, beliefs, and expectations that mirror societal, social, and cultural reproduction” (p. 122). Fergus reinforces the role that schools play in reinforcing the dominant cultures notion of race and ability and how that can influence disproportionality in segregated settings. Kozleski (2016), states that data repositories are human inventions that represent socially constructed units of meaning. The
overrepresentation of Black males segregated in educational settings is representative of “overt racially segregating schooling practices that have given way to largely under-acknowledged and more covert forms of racial segregation, including some special-education practices” (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 454).

Participants also discussed how race, class, and gender may contribute to the overrepresentation of minoritized students at G. Willow. Throughout the interviews it became evident that many of the participants questioned the appropriateness of such a hyper-segregated placement for students and the disproportionate number of black males labeled with ED who were given such a restrictive placement. All the participants were aware of educational law and a student’s right to a FAPE in the LRE, so many questioned how this alternative setting was the LRE for any of the students placed there.

Thus, the interviews revealed that participants were quite aware of the educational inequalities and the barriers that students in this setting encountered. Participants advocated for students transitioning to less restrictive settings and were aware of the socially constructed inequities that their students encountered prior to their placement and beyond. Their perspectives mirrored many scholars who have written about the intersections of race and disability. Ferri and Connor (2005), for example, noted how “racialized conceptions of ability” allow some special education categories to be use “as a tool for continued racial segregation” (p. 454). We also know that the long-term outcomes of disproportionate placement in special education and especially the most segregated settings are dismal and that this is particularly true of those receiving the ED label.

Tomlison (2016), like the participants in the study, critiqued the unequal distribution of educational resources and limited access to high quality programs and educational opportunities
that served to normalize “ways in which racism and ableism circulate” (p. 166). The co-
construction of race and disability are used to justify segregation and contribute to
overrepresentation of students of color in alternative schools. Ensuring that all students have
access to a FAPE in the LRE an issue of social justice and educational equity. When multiply
marginalized students are systematically removed from typical classroom settings and placed in
segregated settings, it creates and maintains a racial hierarchy within our educational system.

Participant responses outline barriers to fulfilling the mission of the program to prepare
students to return to typical school settings. It appears that G. Willow is fundamentally flawed in
terms of the district’s commitment and response to fulfilling the purpose of is program. It would
take high leverage practices and removal of district and building level barriers to improve the
outcomes for students in this alternative program. Former President George W. Bush stated that,
“the disparity in access to quality education between white and black children remains one of
America’s “most urgent civil rights issues,” (NBC News, 2014). Schools can either disrupt the
social stratification of marginalized students or reinforce deficit orientation. “Schools remain a
place where these intersections are systematically minimized. This is the result of 200 years of
viewing disability through a medical model that catalogs impairment rather than considers
disability as a social construct that is shaped by policy, theory, and ethics” (Jung et al., p.9).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the
perceptions of special education teachers working with students at an alternative program.
Several themes emerged from the data that were further examined to determine current
programming practices, needs and recommendations to foster a comprehensive approach to
programming. The interviews provided rich dialogue that gives insight into the participants’
lived experiences teaching students in this segregated setting. The most prominent themes
discussed by special education teachers included important insights into promising practices as well as obstacles and barriers to successfully implementing G. Willow’s vision and mission of preparing students to transition to a less restrictive setting. The special education teachers openly shared their experiences and perspectives about educating and supporting students in the most restrictive setting in the Contemporary School District. They also offered valuable perspectives and provided recommendations that could assist in building a comprehensive program that may help in promoting the education of students in less restrictive settings alongside their peers. The findings from the study identified special education teachers’ successful practices, barriers to success, needed support and components for effective programming.
Chapter 7

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction and Summary of Study

Special education placement, supports, and services can be beneficial to students who are properly identified. However, students who are misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed in segregated settings to receive special education services experience negative school outcomes. Throughout the research much has been revealed from the lived experiences and perspective from special education teacher interviews and review of the literature related to the inequitable nature of special education practices and students of color.

Most of the respondents’ insight of their experience at G. Willow strengthen the argument that segregated programs can’t be expected to serve kids equitably or effectively. Most of the respondents’ interviews suggest that the real function of G. Willow and perhaps the ED classification itself is to get trouble-makers out of regular schools and classrooms. Additionally, it calls into question if the subjective classification of ED itself is used by teachers and administrators in the district to justify placing students in the most restrictive setting in this district and to resist students returning to the sending school.

Race and dis/ability have been used as a vehicle to oppress and marginalize subgroups of students, driven by socially constructed master narrative with race informing ability. The dominant culture’s ideology of the superiority of whiteness has ingrained a racial hierarchy in schools using special education as the vehicle to segregate students. The data suggest that educational inequality and disproportionate representation of minoritized students in special education continues to present a social justice issue that permeates every aspect of our most marginalized students’ educational path despite recent educational reform efforts and the Civil
Right Movement targeted at improving the educational outcomes of students with disabilities and minority students.

The overrepresentation of minoritized students in special education serves as another manifestation of institutional racism that segregates students in the most restrictive educational settings. Further, these social and institutional structures become vehicles for marginalization and segregation of students. According to Heitzgi (2016), “the American public-school system has such a disproportionate number of African Americans in special education, that it has come to resemble the era of racial segregation where Blacks were relegated to separate but (un)equal schools” (p. 8). According to Adams et al. (2016) “schools, however, are not just conduits to the prison system, but also agents of the same carceral racist logic, even in the absence of imprisonment” (p. 137). DisCrit seeks to understand how race and dis/ability figures into whose culture has capital and how that impacts marginalization in schools.

According to Daniel Losen, Director of the Center for Civil Rights Project, “here we are, 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education, and the data altogether still show a picture of gross inequity in educational opportunity” (Motoko, 2014, para 4). Despite educational reform efforts, the special education continuum has become a means of segregating students based on disability status. According to Ferri and Connor (2005), “disability has become a more socially accepted, even normalized, category of marginalization for students of color” (p. 454). Systematic inequity has its roots in centuries of overt racism that are reinforced through structural, institutional, and interpersonal schooling practices. Challenging educational inequity requires systematic and structural changes in our current approach to schooling.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the perceptions of seven special education teachers working at G. Willow Alternative Program. The study was limited to only
special education teachers working at one of the most segregated educational settings in this district. Interviews revealed participant perspectives of effective pedagogical practices and building and district level barriers to fulfilling the school’s mission of preparing students for a smooth transition to a less restrictive school setting. The differential distribution of resources, privilege, and equity are evident when recognizing and acknowledging the over representation of minority students in special education and placement in the most segregated settings. Additionally, this chapter summarizes research outcomes, implications, and recommendations for future research. Insight from seven special education teacher interviews was applied to the theoretical framework of DisCrit specifically Tenet 1.

**Implications**

Most of the participants felt as though segregated settings like G. Willow cannot serve students equitably or effectively. The overwhelming sentiment that the real function of this program is to place disruptive students out of regular schools and classrooms and place them in segregated settings like G. Willow. Special education teachers shared open and honest insight as they reflected on current pedagogical practices, challenges encountered and recommendations for programming. Research on alternative programs serving students with ED is limited especially from the lived experiences and perspective of teachers at these settings (Hoge et al., 2014). This research provided insight into how the intersection of race and disability has created and reinforced educational inequities and marginalization of subgroups of students.

As I reflect on the current state of education for marginalized students and traditional educational practices that continue to over-represent and oppress subgroups of students through the guise of special education, it is impossible not to include both race and dis/ability in critical conversations. Educational equity cannot be realized if subgroups of students are segregated with
little opportunity for access to a less restrictive environment once placed. Perhaps, if district administration announced and supported that all students sent to Willow will be returning within a specified period of time, home schools would have an incentive to work hard and closely with Willow staff members to see that students are ready to return.

It appears, all the incentives are to send the disruptive students away and make sure they don’t return; pretending that we can mend with "promising practices" under those circumstances is bound to be a pipe dream nearly impossible to achieve and filled with broken promises. What was unexpected from the interviews was the realization that the problem is not what teachers are doing or not doing at Willow but lies within the sending schools and the overall system that gives them the option of avoiding having to deal with students that disrupt their hallways and classrooms.

The theoretical framework of DisCrit considers how race and dis/ability are co-constructed and intertwined to expand our knowledge or understanding of how the dominant culture has shaped the notion of “normalcy” which impacts are most marginalized students’ educational trajectory and outcomes. Tenet 1 of DisCrit, “focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy” (Connor et al., 2016, p. 19). DisCrit seeks to understand the ways that “race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 7). This research has demonstrated the disproportionate placement of black males at G. Willow when compared to other subgroups of students in this large urban district. Special education teacher interviews indicated that the experiences of students at G. Willow were qualitatively different from their peers in less restrictive settings.

*Theoretical Implications for Alternative Program Leaders, District Leaders and Teachers*
Research Question One: How do you define successful practices for the students you work with? Tell me about a student who you felt good about in terms of how you were able to help and what was the outcome for this student? What makes this student’s story different in terms of your ability to support them as their teacher?

The findings from the research related to research question one found that all the participants shared that building relationships with students and families increased the likelihood of positive school outcomes. All the teachers believed that the small student to teacher ratio allowed opportunities to get to know their students and families on an individual basis. Students who enter this program are often viewed from a deficit lens. This deficit view feeds into the misuse of special education identification and placement on the continuum.

The study revealed that the stigma attached to students acts as a barrier to inclusive opportunities with typical peers. All the teachers discussed the importance of building relationships with their students, viewing students as capable and resisting stereotypes. The importance of rapport building was critical in terms of successful practices as this approach pushes against the master narratives that define marginalized students. Many of the teachers discussed anticipating and responding to how students in these settings may react to their situation or injustice. Historically marginalized populations of students have been ignored and viewed as “less than”. Structural and institutional barriers within our educational system continue to act as barriers by silencing voices of students who are marginalized.

Although teachers agreed that segregated settings are a social justice issue, they cited some positive characteristics of special education alternative schooling. G. Willow was able to provide teachers with flexibility in their schedule to plan for opportunities to work on academic and social emotional supports throughout the day. Throughout the research the importance of
teaching students’ social skills and how to self-regulate their emotions was important from the teacher’s perspective. According to Mart, Dusenbury, and Weissberg (2011), “educational success depends not only on academic achievement, but also on students’ ability to engage respectfully and responsibly with others” (p. 38). It was clear from these teachers’ perspective that SEL in the classroom was a priority and that students benefit from instruction in social-awareness, self-management, self-awareness, relationships, and responsible decision making. Participants went on to say that the goal of SEL instruction is to improve student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and their school environment in order to thrive. “If we want students to learn, if we are willing to do what it takes to help them to learn, and if we believe that appropriate learning targets are more than mastery of core academic content areas, the SEL has to become a deliberate presence in the classroom” (Frey et al., 2019, p. 13). Teachers went to discuss how the flexibility in programming was ideal for teaching SEL as part of their daily schedule. Although teachers believed that there were positive attributes to this setting, all were opposed to imposed segregation and acknowledged lack of equitable access to educational opportunities.

Research Question Two: What do you see as barriers to students transitioning back to more inclusive settings; what are the roadblocks to our ability to achieve the mission/purpose of the school? Tell me about a student who you felt we or the system failed that student—what do you think contributed to/or was the cause of that failure? How might have things gone differently for this student?

The findings from the research determined that all the special education teachers interviewed believed that building and district level barriers impact students’ ability to successfully reintegrate to a less restrictive setting. The lack of building and district level support
ultimately acted as a roadblock to achieving the mission of the program and reinforced the dis/ability race nexus. Minoritized students are simultaneously raced and dis/abled leaving them in a position where they are perceived as “less than” white peers with or without disability labels (Annamma et al., 2013). Students who fail to meet the standards of whiteness and ability are often labeled as “at-risk”. The labeling of “at risk” begins the process of labeling students as disabled and determining placement on the special education continuum of alternative placements.

Additionally, interviews revealed participants believed that lack of district level support and lack of building level administrative planning in terms of procedures for entering, exit criteria and transition were also barriers to equitable access to an education equal to that of their typical peers. All the participants provided insight into a lack of a documented intake or transition process for students placed in this setting. This is not specific to the Contemporary School District but a common concern and barrier for most alternative programs across the United States. Concern regarding placement of students in more restrictive settings being subjective and the lack of research data that demonstrates the effectiveness of programming is an area that needs further inquiry.

Furthermore, participants believed that lack of investment in student outcomes and equitable access to district resources further impacted student outcomes. Students who enter G. Willow tend to stay for extended lengths and are not successful in transitioning back to their home school once placed. Participants voiced their frustration with sending schools and their lack of involvement once the student was placed. This frustration is not new, and the literature reveals that once a school refers a student to an alternative placement they tend to disconnect from the student. Identity markers such as race, social class, gender and dis/ability have
contributed to the lack of access to resources and opportunities once placed. The lack of district level investment in student outcomes further supports racial hierarchies that supports structures of “normativity.”

Research Question 3: We know what the federal definition of ED is, but how do you define it for yourself? What are your thoughts and feelings about this label and does the “label” correlate with students ending up in an alternative setting? What do the students here all have in common in terms of the” label’ or “besides the label”? How do you think race/class /culture/gender/etc. play into who gets labeled? What would it take for that to change? How did you end up teaching here? What keeps you here?

The study revealed that all the special education teachers believed that there was a correlation between a student’s race and dis/ability and placement in one of the most segregated settings in this district. Additionally, it was evident throughout the research and interviews the intersection of race and dis/ability had shaped the educational path of minoritized students and access to a FAPE. Paulo Freire (2017), stated that “looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (p. 60). Freire’s words can be applied to the oppressive nature that embody our educational system for subgroups of students in a racist and ableist society.

The obstacles and barriers that marginalized students face today have their roots in centuries of systematic racism. Student demographics from G. Willow demonstrates a disproportionate number of black males being labeled as ED and segregated in the most restrictive settings deprived of equitable access to educational opportunities. Teacher interviews support how the intersection of race and disability have played into special education labels and placement decisions. Furthermore, teacher interviews support the literature that found the
experiences of student of color with dis/abilities, such as where they are educated, with whom they are educated, and their access to college, tend to be qualitatively different than the experience of their white peers with the same label (Connor et al., 2016). All the teachers interviewed viewed their students as capable, pushing back against the deficit view that factored into special education placement decisions. All the teachers acknowledged the disproportionate representation of black males in this setting and the stigma attached to these students that ultimately works in denying them opportunities that their peers in less restrictive settings have access to.

**Future Implications for Alternative Program Leaders, District Leaders and Teachers**

According to Radd et al. (2020) “we know that the spirit of universal public education is a spirit of equity and opportunity. Nonetheless, during this noble work and promise, we have gross inequity. This inequity must and can be changed” (p. 9). After review of the literature and participants interviews the idea of LRE for students with the ED label is a prime example of gross inequity. The lack of systemic structures and lack of sending school and district level accountability calls into question the idea of LRE for students with ED in this alternative program. I would suggest that alternative program leaders, district leaders and teachers plan for and implement systematic structures and accountability systems that provide students with opportunities for re-integration. A systematic approach that held sending schools and district level accountable for fulfilling the mission of this program to return students to LRE would promote opportunities and educational equity.

Additionally, it is recommended that high leverage practices continue to be utilized at G. Willow and typical school settings incorporate these pedagogical practices. My hope is that segregated settings will one day be eliminated and that all students will have access to
unqualified belonging without race and ability factoring into the institution of public education. Teachers who embody pedagogical practices that consider planning for and meeting the needs of individual students and resist buying into the stigma attached to marginalized students support equitable access to educational opportunities by resisting master narratives. Teacher interviews demonstrated the power of building rapport with students, listening carefully to who these students are, and valuing student voice support equitable access to educational opportunities. Teachers who resist normative cultural standards that are in the forefront of activism by preparing and advocating for students to enter typical classroom settings promote equity, belonging and social justice.

School leaders that practice equity focused leadership are invested in student outcomes and promote unqualified belonging by breaking down obstacles and barriers that permeate the segregation of marginalized students in public education. Building level administration that clearly defines and promotes entrance, exit, and transition criteria for G. Willow uphold the mission of the program to prepare and return students to less restrictive settings.

**Next steps to address the problem**

Throughout the research and reflecting on participant interviews I wondered what schooling practices would look like if we were immersed in a culture that taught us to truly listen to the counter narratives of multiply minoritized subgroups of students. The normalization of racial hierarchies has led to the justification of the disproportionate placement and segregation of minoritized students. Traditional education approaches seek to rank, and sort students based on norm referenced tests that perpetuate the normative cultural standards. We must question why inclusion is just not part of our everyday practice; thus, DisCrit seeks to understand the imposed segregation of multiply minoritized students looking at how both race and disability factor into
marginalization and schooling practices. The current system poses a social justice issue for students who are segregated from their typical peers and representative of a culture that is dominated by normative cultural standards.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the critical elements required to meet the needs of students with ED, from the perspective of certified special education teachers in an alternative program. This study represents the lived experiences of seven special education teachers in an alternative program for students with ED that have been deemed too difficult to remain in a typical school setting. Although participant interviews provided insight and a deeper understanding of promising pedagogical practices, obstacles and needed supports for students to successfully transition to an LRE setting once placed there were certain limitations while exploring the aim of the study. It is expected that these points will help future researchers to avoid facing the same shortcomings.

The lack of previous research studies on this topic means that my findings will be somewhat provisional. Throughout the literature review common themes have emerged and are examined through previously conducted research studies: (a) limited research data available on alternative program placements from the perspective of teachers who teach students in this setting; (b) staffing: the role that teachers have in the education of students in alternative schools; (c) accountability: the criteria for entrance and transition out of alternative schools; and (d) the over-identification of minoritized students in alternative schools.

The second limitation of this study was that it was limited to the lived experience of seven special education teachers working with students with ED who were willing to answer questions in a one-hour interview. Although the researcher was able to focus on these seven
interviews which incorporated more than half of the special education teachers at G. Willow, this small sample size limits the generalizability of this study. In the context of special education teachers serving students with ED in alternative programs, it may be valuable to interview a wider cross-section of special education teachers across New York State.

Although the commonality in opinions, experience, challenges, and barriers was remarkably consistent given the small sample size. Students, parents and administrators were not interviewed and would likely add to a more comprehensive perspective of the research and conclusions reached. Being limited to just these teachers’ perspective makes it impossible to identify biases or blank spots that may have limited their perspectives.

As an administrator in a public-school setting, I am aware of how difficult it would be to find time to interview special education teachers without interfering with their daily teaching responsibilities. To address this challenge, all interviews were scheduled after school hours at a time that was convenient for participants to avoid disrupting teaching schedules. It was not assumed that responses from this small sample size accurately reflected the experiences of all special education teachers working with students with ED in alternative programs.

While I still agree that qualitative research was the right choice for this study, qualitative research tools, such as interviews, are not designed to capture hard facts. More credibility could be given to this study if coupled with quantitative research. For example, a survey designed for quantitative research, and subsequent statistical analysis, may offer more evidence to strengthen the data discovered using qualitative research tools. For example, utilizing quantitative data on student outcomes and/or successful transition into less restrictive settings can further expose the social injustice and lack of equitable opportunities for full inclusion. Finally, the fact that I am a former administrator at G. Willow could be considered as a limitation of the study. Measures
were taken to ensure that bias was mitigated in the study by adherence to ethical guidelines, descriptive and reflective field notes, as well as following the interview protocol with minimal deviation.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the limitations of the study and recommendations for future practice, suggestions for future research are recommended below:

1. The study was limited to a small number of participants in a large urban district. Only seven special education teachers were interviewed. Conducting the research in another urban district with similar demographics with more participants would further validate and solidify the research findings.

2. Most of the respondents’ comments strengthen the argument that segregated programs can’t be expected to serve kids equitably or effectively. Interviews suggest that the real function of Willow (and perhaps the ED classification itself) is to get trouble-makers out of regular schools and classrooms. Listening to the voices of the special education teachers at Willow suggests that the real problem lies in the sending schools and the overall system or district that gives them the option of avoiding having to deal with students that are disrupting their classrooms or hallways. Conducting research in regular schools (sending schools) to study what they are doing or not doing to support students with ED would provide insight into the real problem of exclusionary practices like segregating students in alternative programs.

3. Throughout the literature review and participant interviews much attention was brought to the importance of collaboration with stakeholders in serving the diverse academic and social emotional needs of student placed in alternative programs. A future study could
be focused on the need for more collaboration between social workers and teachers and implications of students transitioning to LRE.

**Recommendations**

The findings and recommendations of the research identified current practices, building level and district level barriers to successful reintegration into less restrictive settings, and suggestions for future practices. My hope is that the findings will assist school building and district leaders, G. Willow teachers, and educators in public school settings opportunities to promote equitable access to educational opportunities for marginalized students. Additionally, creating an awareness of the overt practices that continue to perpetuate the oppression of subgroups of students by acknowledging how both race and dis/ability have been used to oppress marginalized students will help to respond to the historical, structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism that contributes to inequitable educational opportunities. Table 5 illustrates the recommendations related to the three broad research questions and the themes derived from the data.
### Table 5

#### Recommendations Related to Research Questions and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Related Theme</th>
<th>Results/Findings</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1. How do you define successful practices for the students that you work with? Tell me about a student who you felt we or the system failed that student – what do you think contributed to/or was the cause of that failure?</td>
<td>Successful Practices: Effective Pedagogical Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of a comprehensive program that fully develops and implements a well-defined core curriculum supported by on-going professional development, differentiation, tiered intervention of supports (academic/social, emotional) in order to leverage access to students at G. Willow Alternative Program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ2. What do you see as barriers to students transitioning back to more inclusive settings; what are roadblocks to our ability to achieve the mission/vision of the school? Tell me about a student who you felt we or the system failed that student—what do you think contributed to/or was the cause of that failure? How might have things gone differently?</td>
<td>Obstacles and Barriers to Successful Reintegration to less restrictive Setting: Building Level Barriers</td>
<td>Entrance, Exit, Transition Process</td>
<td>Development and implementation of a well-defined intake, exit, and transition process that considers the systematic challenges that hold students back from transitioning to less restrictive settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3. We know the federal definition of ED is, but how do you define it for yourself? What are your thoughts and feeling about this label and does the “label” correlate with students ending up in an alternative setting? What do the students here all have in common in terms of the “label” or “besides the label”? How do you think race/class/culture/gender/etc. play into who gets labeled? What would it take for that to change? How did you end up teaching here? What keeps you here?</td>
<td>Social Injustice</td>
<td></td>
<td>On-going PD in the area of culturally responsive pedagogical practices to reduce bias and disproportionate placement in special education.</td>
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Phenomenological interviews answered the research questions and drove recommendations for future practice. Throughout this process I learned that racism and ableism are inherent in our school system. Structural and institutional barriers are indicative of a school culture that “uphold notions of normalcy” thereby disproportionately labeling and segregating students of color. The recommendations are a response to address and minimize obstacles and barriers presented from the perspective of special education teachers and review of the literature. The recommendations are not an attempt to fix the problem of racism that permeates our educational system; but rather to put in place a comprehensive system of procedures, protocols, and supports that would assist with promoting student reintegration into less restrictive settings and provide more opportunities for equitable access to a FAPE.

Fixing the problem of special education policies that ultimately segregate marginalized students in alternative programs would require considering how race and dis/ability have been used to deny subgroups of students access to equitable access to educational opportunities equal to that of their white peers. According to Connor et al. (2016), “today, various notions of dis/ability (identified through what are assumed to be objective clinical assessments or responses to ‘evidence-based’ interventions) reinforce similar race and ability hierarchies” (p. 23). The aim is to provide professional development to reduce the overrepresentation of students placed into alternative programs and begin to address the racist ideologies that have contributed to the systematic challenges and coherence in providing all students access to a FAPE in less restrictive settings. Ultimately, recommendations aim to respond to the racist tones that have permeated our educational system by creating a systematic approach to push back against the special education processes that have reinforced the justification and segregation of students placed at G. Willow Alternative Program.
**Recommendations for Future Practice**

There is no subgroup of students that are impacted by the intersection of racism and ableism more than marginalized students placed in some of the most segregated educational settings. The findings from this study suggest that a perspective within the district that identifies special education as a default system for struggling learners, especially students of color, is pervasive. Outcomes for marginalized students at G. Willow as compared to the general population and other student subgroups within this district reveal inequitable access to the core curriculum, highly effective instruction, and tiered interventions. Based on this research, it is recommended that school district leaders commit to fulfilling the mission of the program.

Recommendations for implementation are based on teacher interviews and my own professional experience as a special education teacher and administrator working with marginalized students. The first recommendation I would suggest would be the implementation of a strategic planning tool like a SWOT Analysis. A SWOT Analysis is used as a deliberate analysis and planning technique to help with assessing a program’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and potential threats to fulfilling the mission and vision of the program. This approach will be helpful to serve as a baseline for future programming Table 6 represents an example of a SWOT analysis with guiding questions to assess programming strengths and needs.
Table 6

*Special Education Alternative Program SWOT Analysis*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNAL FACTORS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRENGTHS (+)</strong></td>
<td><strong>WEAKNESSES (-)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong> – Factors that are likely to have a positive effect on (or be an enabler to) achieving the school’s objectives? What do we do exceptionally well? What advantages do we have? What valuable assets and resources do we have? What do stakeholders identify as our strengths?</td>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong> – Factors that are likely to have a negative impact on (or be a barrier to) achieving the school’s objectives? What could we do better? Where are we vulnerable?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXTERNAL FACTORS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OPPORTUNITIES (+)</strong></td>
<td><strong>THREATS (-)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities</strong> – External Factors that are likely to have a positive effect on meeting or exceeding the school’s aims, or goals not previously considered? What opportunities do we know about, but have not addressed?</td>
<td><strong>Threats</strong> - Are weaknesses likely to make the program vulnerable? What external roadblocks exist that block our progress? Is there significant change happening for the program? Do we have the resources available to meet the needs of the program?</td>
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(Morrison, 2018)

The next recommendation consists of creating a comprehensive planning committee with representation from district wide staff with smaller breakout sub-committees. The establishment of a planning committee will encourage buy-in and investment in program implementation and student outcomes. The purpose of the alternative program sub-committees is to make suggestions, offer input, and guide the process towards governance, practices and policies that contribute to the desired program outcome. Sub-committee recommendations will be compiled and shared with the entire committee for review. Final recommendations for programming once approved by the comprehensive planning committee will go to the Superintendent, Director of Special Education, and Board of Education for review and approval.
Based on teacher feedback it is recommended that focus areas for sub committees are as follows: academic programming, SEL programming, entrance criteria, in-take/orientation, exit criteria, transition process and professional development. To generate interest in serving on sub-committees an email will be sent out to district staff inviting staff to participate. The SWOT analysis will serve as a baseline for the planning committee to begin their work in their assigned sub-committees. Below are the recommendations for sub-committee focus areas derived from teacher interviews and my own experience as an educator working with marginalized students. The recommendations are a guide that may assist sub-committee members in planning for and making recommendations in their sub-committee groups.

**Academic Programming Recommendations**

The findings from this study suggest that building level and district level obstacles and barriers have impacted student outcomes. Building an instructional program that fully develops and implements a well-defined core curriculum taught by highly skilled teachers, on-going professional development, and tiered interventions and supports is imperative to leverage access to the grade level content for students in this setting. Sub-committees will need to consider if the methods of instructional delivery are varied and appropriate and engage students.

Based on teacher interviews and my own experience, it is recommended implementing an instructional approach that focuses on “Personalized Learning” would encourage positive school outcomes. Personalization of instruction allows students to get the instruction and direction they need when they need it. It is instruction built on students’ strengths, needs, and interests. Personalized learning is a teaching model based on the premise that students learn in different ways and at different paces. Each student work with their teacher to create a “learning plan” focusing on how they learn, what they know, and what their skills and interests are. It’s the
opposite of the “one size fits all” approach. Students will work alongside their teachers to set both short-term and long-term goals. This process helps students take ownership of their learning. This alternative program will focus on creating a learning environment in which a students' individual strengths, needs, motivations, progress and goals are part of the students' individual learner profile.

It is recommended that all staff have the opportunity professional development focusing on the four key elements to success when implementing personalized learning. The four key elements a) flexible content and tools; b) data-driven decisions; c) targeted instruction; and d) student reflection and ownership are all areas teachers discussed as part of their successful pedagogical practice. A personalized learning approach would help to prepare students to transition to less restrictive settings and would serve students well in a typical school setting.

**Planning for and Implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Academic (RTI) and Social Emotional (PBIS)**

It is recommended that a MTSS is implemented to ensure student data is reviewed and students are appropriately tiered for interventions both academic and social-emotional behavioral to promote student growth. The sub-committee can work together to make recommendations for the planning out the three tiers and a system for prioritizing students for interventions and data tracking. Implementing a MTSS for students is critical to student gains; ensuring that a process and procedures are in place to implement with fidelity. When implemented correctly MTSS incorporate whole system engagement and all adults as resources to provide interventions and students. Figure 6 represents a planning template for the sub-committees to tease out PBIS (social-emotional and behavior) and RTI (academic) supports.
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programming Recommendations

In July of 2018, New York State Education Law § 804 was amended to include mental health instruction in schools. Specifically, the legislation requires the health education curriculum to include several dimensions of health, including mental health, and the relation of physical and mental health; and be designed to enhance student understanding, attitudes and behaviors that promote health, well-being and human dignity. Making mental health a regular part of children’s discussions around health is a step forward in raising a generation that’s able to name, discuss and get help for mental health issues without feeling ashamed of the topic. This legislation is a promising trend and creates an opportunity to incorporate mental health education along with SEL instruction in classrooms.

All the teacher interviews reflected the importance of mental health supports and explicit SEL instruction. Interviews indicated an inconsistency in delivery of SEL instruction. It is recommended that the sub-committee assigned to SEL programming review social emotional programs that would promote a culture and climate that is positive and preventative rather than
punitive. Positive interactions with staff help students develop social and emotional competencies, which is the ultimate goal of any SEL program.

The program committee would identify behavior expectations they want to develop among their students. Ideally, this is a short list of three to five behaviors that would be integrated schoolwide (Tier 1 universal supports). As the school identifies these core values, it also decides how those values might look in a variety of settings. For example, showing respect might mean that a student raises their hand in the classroom, follows rules in the hallways, and uses table manners in the cafeteria (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2021). As the program moves through the instructional year, administration and staff are able to assess the effectiveness of their PBIS framework through analysis of data such as discipline referrals, attendance and academic achievement.

**Entrance, Exit, and Transition Criteria**

Interviews indicated that the real function of Willow may be from the perspective of sending schools is to get disruptive students out of regular schools and classrooms. The participants indicated that one of the barriers was the reluctance of sending schools to take students back once placed. If the district announced that all students sent to Willow will be returning within a specified period of time, home schools would have an incentive to remain connected and work closely with Willow staff to see that students are ready to return.

Contemporary School District failed to put in place policies and procedures to make good on the school’s vision to prepare students to transition to LRE. The second recommendation for future practice is the development and implementation of a well-defined entrance, exit, and transition process that considers the systematic challenges that hold students back from transitioning to less restrictive educational settings. Current research has shown that low
expectations and lack of clearly defined goals of programming in special education alternative school settings make meeting expectations unclear for both students and staff. According to Hoge et al. (2014), “the absence of agreed upon expectations for the school, as perceived by the staff, seemed to be a major hindrance to defining program effectiveness. An underlying question that many faced was: How does a school achieve goals that do not exist in an explicit manner?” (p. 309). Participants also voiced the same sentiment expressing that the lack of clarity from district and building administrators made it difficult to fulfill the mission of the program.

**Entrance Criteria.** The findings from the study indicate there is not a documented pre-referral or entrance criterion for students entering the program. It is recommended that there is a formal documented pathway for referring a student for placement. The participants all agreed that there needs to be well defined procedures and protocols for students entering the program that considers the appropriateness of placement and a system of checks and balances to ensure that students are in the proper setting. Participants recommended that students who enter the program should have an IEP with ED classification or mental health diagnosis. Throughout the interviews several of the participants believed that students were not identified correctly or were placed in the programming not having an ED classification.

The following are recommendations for pre-referral requirements prior to students being considered for possible program placement: 1) completed FBA; 2) BIP implemented, progress monitored and modified as needed; 3) referral to behavioral support specialist for additional recommendations; 4) referral to Student Intervention Team (SIT) including collaboration with mental health provider; 5) SIT Team has developed a Comprehensive Student Success Plan (CSSP); and, 6) student is receiving counseling services IEP or Agency provided if appropriate.
In addition, it is recommended that within 30 days of entry a student’s skills will be comprehensively assessed, and a skills inventory completed to tier supports and identify the social, emotional, and academic skills necessary for the student to transition to a less restrictive setting. An exit goal should be established in collaboration with referring school staff, parent/guardian and student. The lack of criteria for entrance into G. Willow has added to the complexity in programming. This process will assist with defining transition readiness and removing the subjective nature of student transition decisions.

**Orientation or In-take.** Throughout the research one of the main obstacles or barriers to student reintegration was the lack of communication with students and families regarding programming. It is a recommendation that prior to a student starting at G. Willow an intake meeting including the student, parent, or guardian and is scheduled. Student and parent would have the opportunity to meet the staff (administrator, special education teacher, childcare worker, teaching assistant, related services if applicable, social worker) they would be working with. Review of programming would entail: a) review program's mission/vision, building expectations, and district's Code of Conduct; b) review of academic programming and SEL programming; c) review and discuss exit criteria/ individual student goals; e) program and district-wide supports are reviewed with family and student; f) complete paperwork and sign releases; and, g) time for questions.

Additionally, it is recommended within 30 days, a student’ skills should be comprehensively assessed using an assessment tool like the Thinking Skills Inventory. Based on the results and collaboration with staff, it is recommended students are programmed for the appropriate level of academic and social emotional supports. The exit goal will then be revisited with student, parent and/or guardian and appropriate G. Willow Alternative Program staff.
Exit Criteria. Throughout the research it was evident that teachers in G. Willow had very little direction from administration in terms of identifying criteria for transition readiness. The process for determining student readiness to return to a more inclusive setting was not established. Teachers questioned, what is the criteria for a student being considered for transitioning to a less restrictive setting? How are we defining exit criteria and what needs to be progress monitored? What information do we want to send to the receiving school? Questions pertaining to district expectations determining a student’s readiness acted as a barrier to students transitioning.

A formal process for determining exit criteria should include a comprehensive review of student progress towards reaching defined exit goals and student data collected both academic and social emotional. Possible data for sub-committees to consider for determining transition readiness may include reviewing a) BIP progress monitoring; b) IEP goals; c) academic and SEL data collected; d) progress made towards discharge goals. Sub-committees will make recommendations to the larger committee. Students should be making progress and are able to demonstrate replacement behaviors in order to be considered for transition; and, d) academic and social emotional growth: teachers and mental health providers meet to discuss student progress and action plan progress. Teachers and mental health providers collaborate to discuss appropriateness and comprehensive transition plan.

Transition Process. Throughout the interview’s teachers questioned (1) how are we preparing students to transition to a less restrictive setting; and, (2) what are we doing to connect with the receiving school to ensure that students have the supports and resources to meet their needs? It is recommended that students transitioning to a less restrictive setting should be reviewed through the Student Intervention Team (SIT) process and the Committee on Special
Education (CSE). The CSE should determine school placement based on feedback from parent, school team and review of student data. The transition plan will include a comprehensive plan to ensure a smooth transition and coordination of supports and services with the receiving school. It is recommended that a comprehensive transition plan will be completed outlining individual students (a) Individualized Education Plan (IEP); (b) Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP); (c) related services; and, (d) tiered system of supports currently in place. Students should have the opportunity to tour the receiving school prior to official start. It is recommended that the receiving school is a part of the planning for student transition.

Social Injustice

*Responding to Overidentification through Professional Development*

The final recommendation is to systematically address the special education identification rate that demonstrates an overrepresentation of minoritized students in high incidence categories like ED. It is recommended that on-going professional development to increase the use of evidenced based practices and creating a mechanism for regular collaboration and data-driven decision-making will assist in decreasing disproportionate placement and identification. Special education processes and practices related to pre-referral supports, referral, testing, identification, and placement in special education should be carefully analyzed to ensure that students are not being over-identified for special education services and high incidence categories.

It is recommended that the Contemporary School District address and correct the common perceptions that special education is the default system for all struggling learners and simultaneously work to improve core instruction and tiered interventions for all students through on-going professional development. Furthermore, an awareness of disproportionate labeling of students of color and how that has marginalized students of color may assist in changing
mindsets that have contributed to the discrimination and oppression of subgroups of students. Furthermore, providing professional development opportunities that promotes a district culture that affirms diversity and culturally responsive pedagogical practices that supports all students to achieve promotes a culture of equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

Literature related to students with ED in an alternative program from the perspective of special education teachers is limited. This study expanded the current literature by providing special education teachers an opportunity to share their lived experiences of teaching students with ED in a special education alternative program setting. The theoretical framework of DisCrit allowed me to examine how the intersection of racism and ableism continue to shape public education; especially the special education process of multiply minoritized students, as well as help to lay bare unexamined cultural norms that contribute to minoritized students being placed in one of the most segregated settings. DisCrit finds it problematic to “view students without context; that is blaming the student to achieve both academically and/or behaviorally as the responsibility of the student alone (Annamma et al., 2013).

At times participant interviews were often uncritical about race and disability and almost resigned in a way about the system in which they were teaching on a daily basis. The obstacles and barriers that participants identified through their lived experience further supports how the notions of normality defined by the dominant culture acted as a barrier to students transitioning to an LRE. All of the participants provided insight into how the current system perpetuated students in this program being viewed as “less than” their peers in typical classroom settings within this district. Despite being immersed in a culture that utilizes race and dis/ability to justify the segregation of marginalized students’ participants were able to identify pockets of promise.
Although participants were persistently faced with district and building level barriers to fulfilling the mission of G. Willow, they continued to disrupt the dominant cultures master narrative of students placed in this program. All of the special education teachers provided insight into the intersection of race and dis/ability and how that has contributed to the overrepresentation of student of color in their classrooms. Although, they may have seemed resigned to the systematic structure in which they were teaching; they continued to focus on their students and preparing them to transition to more inclusive settings. I found throughout this process that it may be the special education teachers who are the Pockets of Promise; those that identify inequities, listen carefully to counter narratives and recognize that segregation remains a social justice issue.

The recommendations I hope would assist in developing a comprehensive program that works to fulfill the mission of reintegrating students to less restrictive settings. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the field by assisting schools and districts to support students in less restrictive settings through effective pedagogical practices and address the educational inequities that minoritized students face.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
MEMORANDUM

TO: Beth Ferri
DATE: April 9, 2020
SUBJECT: Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants
IRB #: 20-003
TITLE: Pockets of Promise: The Pedagogical Practices and Perspectives of Highly Effective Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance in Special Education Classrooms

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given expedited approval. The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

This protocol is approved as of April 9, 2020. An Expedited Status Report will be requested annually, until you request your study be closed.

It is important to note that federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate through the informed consent process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Your consent form has been date stamped with the approval date. If at any time during the course of your research, a revised consent document is submitted to the IRB via an amendment, it will be stamped with the date the amendment is approved.

Formal amendment requests are required for any changes to the initially approved protocol. It is important to note that changes cannot be initiated prior to IRB review and approval; except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. All protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB website at: Amendment Request Form.doc.

Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence on the Report of Unanticipated Problems form located on the IRB website at: Report of Unanticipated Problems.doc.

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Katherine McDonald
IRB Chair

DEPT: Teaching & Leadership, 150 Huntington Hall
STUDENT: Jennifer DiBello

Research Integrity and Protections | 214 Lyman Hall | Syracuse, NY 13244-1200 | 315.443.3013 | orip.syr.edu
April 25, 2022

Invitation Letter

Dear (Insert name of potential participant)

This letter serves as an invitation for you to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Teaching & Leadership at Syracuse University under the supervision of Beth A. Ferri, Ph.D. I would like to provide you with more information about this research study and what your participation would entail if you decide to take part in this research.

The purpose of this research is to provide insight from the perspective of special education teachers working with students with emotional disturbance the pedagogical practices required to meet the diverse needs of students placed in an alternative school setting. The significance of this qualitative descriptive study will add to the body of research; the elements required to provide comprehensive instructional and social, emotional programming for students with emotional disturbance while placed in an alternative school and when preparing students to transition to a less restrictive educational setting from the perspective of special education teachers.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately one hour in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location. The criteria selected for the proposed qualitative study requires that the participant is a certified special education teacher working with students with emotional disturbance in an alternative school setting with a minimum of five years teaching experience.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University. However, the final decision about participation is yours. I hope that the results of this study will benefit students through the identification of elements required for comprehensive instructional and social emotional supports for those who are placed in alternative schools.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at (315) 952-938, or by e-mail at Jldibell@syr.edu or my supervisor, Beth A. Ferri, Ph.D. at (315) 443-1465, or e-mail at baferri@syr.edu.

I will follow up with you in one week to discuss your participation in this study and/or if you would like to discuss the details of this project.

Thank you for your consideration,
Sincerely,

Jennifer L. DiBello (Jldibell@syr.edu)
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Teaching and Leadership, Syracuse University

School of Education
Department of Teaching and Leadership
150 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY, 13244
Protocol Title: Pockets of Promise: The Pedagogical Practices and Perspectives of Highly Effective Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance in Special Education Classrooms

Principal Investigator/Key Research Personnel:
Beth A. Ferri, Principal Investigator/Faculty Supervisor
Phone for further information: (315) 443-2685
Jennifer DiBello, Student Researcher
Phone for further information: (315) 952-5938

Introduction: The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about participation in a research study and offer you the opportunity to decide whether you wish to participate. You can take as much time as you wish to decide and can ask any questions you may have now, during or after the research is complete by contacting Beth Ferri, Principal Investigator (315) 443-2685 or Jennifer DiBello, Student Researcher (315) 952-5938. Your participation in this study is voluntary and may withdraw at any time.

Purpose of the Research Study: School districts across the United States are finding it difficult to meet the needs of students with emotional disturbance particularly students that exhibit serious social, emotional and behavioral challenges. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand, from the perspective of Special Education Teachers, the elements considered effective in meeting the needs of students with emotional disturbance placed in alternative schools? The aim of this study is to add to the body of knowledge by providing insight from Special Education Teachers that work with students with emotional disturbance pedagogical practices that have been deemed effective in fostering positive student outcomes.

Role of the Participant: Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a phone interview lasting no longer than one hour in length scheduled during a mutually agreed upon time. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. You will be asked questions that will provide insight from your knowledge and experience as a special education teacher working with students with emotional disturbance. Three broad questions will guide the interview:

1. What elements are required for comprehensive alternative school programming both instructional and social emotional while placed in an alternative school?
2. What elements (instructional and social emotional) are required when preparing to return students to a less restrictive educational setting (typical school)?
3. What are the barriers experienced meeting the diverse needs of students with emotional disturbance while placed in an alternative school setting and when preparing to transition to a less restrictive educational setting (typical classroom setting)?

What are the possible risks of participation in this research study? The probability of harm or injury (physical, psychological, social, or economic) occurring as a result of participation in this study are minimal. All information will be kept confidential, pseudonyms will be used so that no actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study will be used.

What are the possible benefits of participation in this research study? Participants will not receive any direct benefits to participate in the research study. Rather the proposed study will add to the body of knowledge
Facility ____________________________________________________________________________ ADP ____________________________________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): __________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Date __________________ Time __________________ Setting __________________

Jurisdiction __________________ Funding Source __________________

Appointed or Elected

Semi-Structured Interview Script

Introductory Protocol

To facilitate my note taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have three broad questions that I would like to cover.

Introduction & Ground Rules

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. You have been identified as an experienced teacher who has a great deal to share about teaching students with emotional disturbance in an alternative school. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand, from the perspective of special education teachers, successful practices and barriers in meeting the needs of students with emotional disturbance placed in an alternative school setting. The study does not aim to evaluate your current programs or services, rather I am trying to gain in-depth understanding of the critical elements required for comprehensive instructional and social-emotional supports and services to meet the diverse needs of students with emotional disturbance that are placed in alternative schools. Furthermore, understanding the role alternative schools play in the education of students...
Possible Probes: What is the working definition from your experience as a teacher in this setting?

Q. What are your thoughts and feeling about this label and does the “label” correlate with students ending up in an alternative setting?

Q. What do the students here all have in common in terms of the” label’ or “besides the label”?
Possible Probes: How would you describe the students that attend your school? How do they compare to students in other schools within the district (if you have taught outside of this setting)? Race, Class, Gender? What is the main special education classification?

Q. How do you think race/class/culture/ gender/etc. play into who gets labeled?
Possible Probes: From your experience is there over-representation or disproportionality in terms of students in this setting (race, class, culture, gender?)

Q. What would it take for that to change?
Possible Probes: How could over-representation and/or disproportionality be minimized in terms of who gets labeled? (Professional Development opportunities? Mind-set? Etc.).

Q. How did you end up teaching here? What keeps you here?

Is there anything that I have not asked that is important to your profession as a special education teacher in an alternative school?
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Biographical Sketch

Jennifer DiBello is an administrator in the Syracuse City School District, in Syracuse, New York. She attended LeMoyne College and received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology in 2002 and her Master of Science in Teaching from Lemoyne College in 2004. Her certifications include Special Education K-12 and General Education 1-6. Ms. DiBello taught Special Education for over ten years in the Syracuse City School District in a variety of classroom settings. Ms. DiBello earned her Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Disability Studies in 2006 from Syracuse University. After earning her CAS, she worked as a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) Consultant Teacher assisting new teachers’ induction into the district and later went on to be the Coordinator of Educator Effectiveness for the Office of Human Resources. Ms. DiBello received her CAS in School Building and School District Leadership in 2014 from Syracuse University.