

A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY TO EXAMINE TEXT SELECTION PRACTICES FOR
SECONDARY STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Approximately 25% of young adult literature incorporates a character with a disability. (Koss & Teale, 2009) I interpret this issue with a critical literacy theory lens, which involves the analysis of various texts to determine whether there are any discriminatory underpinnings within. It considers the social and political opinions of authors as well. I collected qualitative data in the form of informal and semi-structured interviews, as well as observations, to promote a deeper understanding of curricular representation of children with learning disabilities. Interviews were conducted after school, in the teacher's classroom. This location choice provided an opportunity for teachers to physically disclose the various resources that they discussed during their interviews. I asked educators a series of questions regarding text selection for students with learning disabilities. After conducting the study, I learned that middle school English Language Arts teachers are permitted to select texts for whole-class instruction. Yet, they must undergo an approval process, which includes a committee of school administrators, teachers, and parents. Classroom teachers are also permitted to build their classroom libraries for silent sustained reading (SSR) time, which is scheduled to occur multiple times per week, typically after a student's lunch period. These teachers are able to curate their classroom libraries, and children are also granted the autonomy to decide upon texts that they would like to read. Ultimately, upon analyzing the protagonists in the selected texts, this study further suggests there is a lack of representation of students with learning disabilities in young adult literature. This is a national social justice issue in the field of education, specifically for students that never see themselves proportionally represented within the literature selected for them by administrators and teachers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As an educator, I have learned there is a relative rarity and/or scarcity of instructional materials that feature children with disabilities. Authors often write about protagonists they can identify with or about members of the dominant culture. In doing so, individuals with disabilities are often excluded from young adult literature. Consequently, students with disabilities tend to see their peers reflected in their classroom texts rather than themselves.

Approximately 25% of young adult literature incorporates a character with a disability. (Koss & Teale, 2009). Additionally, Pennell, Wollak, & Koppenhaver (2017) discovered, authors that include a character with a disability typically focus on sensory or physical impairments rather than autism or learning disabilities. I interpret this issue with a critical literacy theory lens, which involves the analysis of various texts to determine whether there are any discriminatory underpinnings within. It considers the social and political opinions of authors as well. Children with disabilities may have difficulty expressing themselves; this can result in diminished advocacy skills which may, in turn, lead to the exclusion from proportionate representation in educational resources.

Critical literacy situates this problem in relationships among identity, power, and agency. (Mills, 2016) More specifically, “critical literacy involves using and analyzing language with an awareness of the social construction of identity, power and social implications” (Mills, 2016, Loc. 1360). Entities in power have access to seemingly unlimited resources and may thereby, most effortlessly, become agents for change. At times, students with disabilities are silenced and disadvantaged within learning environments; they do not possess the same power as their instructors. (Koss & Teale, 2009)

These unsettling realities contribute to overarching themes in education, which are inextricably linked to the perpetuation of dominant figures that rest at the top of our social hierarchy. I intend to promote a greater level of awareness surrounding the deliberation with which stakeholders select instructional resources to educate children with disabilities. These stories must be shared, because they are valid and important to our society as a whole.

The Potential of Rich Classroom Discussions

I believe that researchers can shed more light on students that require 2 hours to complete an exam, rather than 45 minutes; students who require seating in the front of the classroom, away from distractions; students who utilize supplementary tools, such as reading trackers, to follow along while others read aloud in class. Accommodations are the minute, powerful changes that contribute to a special education student's success. In order for these accommodations to be successful, a special educator must supply his/her expertise to advocate for student needs. These educators also possess the power to select impactful instructional resources for their students which can encourage rich classroom discussions.

Language and literacy, in the form of classroom discussions, are powerful tools that satisfy many purposes. Medina & Campano (2006) listed the following uses for language: communication, cultural pride, social capital, the social grammar of school, a set of discrete skills that must be learned to negotiate institutional demands, and an exercise of power and authority. If students read a book and identify with a character, via one of these language uses, then they can “extend traditional written and spoken curricular engagements” (Medina & Campano, 2006, p. 340). Students may begin to look beyond the pages, and understand the underlying, unwritten ideas and hypotheses of their readings. Our youth have the capacity to make connections to texts “to discover, explore, recognize, and articulate their own lived experience... so that they can become

self-aware and self-conscious of their unique worldviews” (Iyer and Ramachandran, 2019, p. 65). This is an important concept which can promote extraordinary classroom experiences.

Many times, storylines are limited to children with severe physical disabilities. This perspective is still valuable, because it brings attention to children with different levels of physical and mental abilities; however, many students with learning disabilities do not have physical characteristics that lead others to perceive a disability. In other words, their learning disability is a *hidden disability*.

Who Has the Power to Change?

Educators possess the authority to guide the oral and written narratives within their classrooms; this includes the types of books students read. Consequently, when teachers select a particular text, they must consider the sociopolitical implications of their actions. (Mills, 2016) As educators aim to reposition and improve their practice, they must ask themselves if they are selecting appropriate texts for their students.

Publishers

Moreover, the attempt to achieve pedagogical universality, teaching all students in the same manner, merely results in “an inherent blandness, superficiality and conservatism in the texts children read” (De Castell & Luke, 1983, p. 385). Authors also note, “In order to capture the multinational market, publishers and editors must create a product which will pass as culturally significant knowledge in diverse social contexts, without offending the sensibilities of local parents, teachers, special-interest groups, politicians, and, of course, administrators who make purchases. The result is a ‘watering down’ of the content for marketing purposes” (De Castell & Luke, 1983, p. 385). As a result, administrators must implement changes to curriculum and possess a firm grasp on how ableism operates within the education system.

Teachers

I can relate to Greene's (1995) statement, "I have been creating and continue to create a self by means of that project, that mode of gearing into the world" (p. 1). As humans, we create every day. As educators, we create every second. Teachers make four micro-decisions every minute. This could be interpreted as creating 1,500 pieces of art each school day. (Goldberg & Houser, 2017) Teachers create masterpieces as they "bring into being the 'as if' worlds" (Greene, 1995, p. 4) by designing their classrooms, as well as the rules and practices that are followed within it.

As Medina & Campano (2006) noted, "text and selves work together in a productive dialectic that creates a dynamic, in-between space where students explore characters' fictional lives but also their own actual lives and identities in schools" (p. 339). Thus, a student may read about, identify with, and relate to a fictional character. However, complete, overlapping experiences between students and fictional characters are not required in order to be deeply relatable. One characteristic or one emotion may serve as a bridge, or a conversation starter, for a classroom discussion surrounding topics such as incarceration, grief, and displacement, which are the main topics that my participants discussed in their interviews. I aim to encourage educators to employ their personal experiences within their classrooms; this is the main reason why I sought out this degree. I plan to utilize my new-found knowledge to become a better educator and to also uplift other educators to do the same.

Further research on this topic is needed in order to confront the forces and structures, enforced by administrators, that continue to constrain educational resources for and about students with disabilities. As a consequence, we must continually consider social inequalities as detrimental encumbrances to the success of our students in order to "understand that texts are culturally,

socially, politically, and historically constructed and situated” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 390). Additionally, we should ask ourselves how we may teach students about their place in society, as it relates to social justice. I believe that this type of educational research is crucial because it contributes to the advancement of marginalized members of society.

Personal Importance of the Problem

The word *pathology* is in my professional title: speech-language pathologist. To *pathologize* is to “make an assumption about a larger group based on an idea or preconceived notion that [you] already have” (Loggins, 2022). I will make every effort to do away with my preconceived notions of general and special education teachers and students because this can be destructive and insolent. I run the risk of *pathologizing* members of these groups because I do not fit in either category (i.e., general or special education teacher or student). We all have biases, whether we recognize it or not, but we can reduce this pathologizing behavior by learning about different cultures and interacting with individuals that are unlike ourselves. (Loggins, 2022)

In any event, I often wonder whether I am continually pathologizing the students in my research. Ultimately, they are all multifaceted individuals that likely identify with other subcultures, such as their neighborhood, ethnicity, favorite sports teams, etc., rather than their disability. As a researcher, I struggle with my tendencies as a clinician to predict an outcome, instead of merely collecting data and allowing verities to lead. The participants of my study are far more than one-dimensional automatons, primed to define themselves by a perceived disability.

The nature of my profession is similar to that of a mechanic; we are trained to find something wrong and *fix* it. However, as a researcher in the field, I do not wish to continue in this deficit mindset. Lately, I have considered changing my title to Speech-Language Specialist, in lieu

of Speech-Language Pathologist, in order to change any negative connotation, the title would denote.

Educators, including myself, must become agents of change for our multidimensional students in order to lift the voices of countless students relegated to silence. This encouragement will lead to greater power within the disability community, which will in turn, lead to better resources. As students receive the specific and appropriate level of education that they need, they will undoubtedly perform better in school. Additionally, as these children mature into adults, they will utilize these specialized strategies in their college classrooms and/or in the workplace. The cycle will continue when children with disabilities become adults with disabilities and self-advocate to reach their maximum potential. (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015)

As a student of literacy, I understand and honor the importance of culture and language as it relates to literacy instruction. There is no universal pedagogy for teaching literacy. As Perry (2020) noted, “The universal is an onto-ethico-epistemological concept; in other words, what is understood as common across the universe depends on where you stand (figuratively and literally) and how you see and experience this universe. We might then imagine that there are many universals depending on where the teller is positioned” (Perry, 2020, p. 4). My students and I have both contrasting and coinciding contemporaneous cultural knowledge, which will ultimately affect the methods in which I teach them, and the ways in which they understand my lessons.

My upbringing, as a millennial in the Northeast region of the United States with two college-educated parents, is not particularly unique. Yet, my positionality, in terms of geographic location and opportunities for advancement, will not completely coincide with my students. Pluriversality (i.e., multiple universal truths) is more applicable than universality to our understanding of literacy, culture, and language instruction. Thus, I interpret the concept of

universality with the recognition and appreciation that we do not have one universal truth system in the field of education. (Perry, 2020)

It is important to learn how to read and write. However, there is no universal way to learn these specific skills. As previously stated, each student brings their own ideas and background knowledge to the classroom. Thus, literacy is not a singular concept, as it may be realized and interpreted in many different forms. In fact, “children live multiliterate lives as they move as consumers and producers of knowledge across real imagined spaces, across worlds and communities, and in textual diasporas grounded in traveling texts that flow through media, digital spaces, and the consumption structures of global markets” (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014, p. 5). Thus, language, literacy, and culture coincide in a child’s life at an early age. Children learn the value of their words in complex spaces and discourses, and how to adapt in various settings.

Research Questions

My research study will explore middle school text selection in special and general education English Language Arts classrooms. This study will attempt to deduce how the rationale of educators of children with learning disabilities dictates the collection of texts within classrooms. I will analyze young adult literature by focusing on issues surrounding advocacy and representation.

My research questions include:

- What insights does a critical literacy framework provide for understanding issues that students with learning disabilities face surrounding instructional resources in secondary literacy classrooms?
- How do teachers consider representations of disability in literature in their text selection practices?

Background

Quite often, at the secondary level, special education students are placed in intervention courses instead of elective courses. For example, rather than enrolling in a home economics course, the student must participate in a reading intervention course, because they are below grade level in this particular subject area. Unfortunately, this limits special education students from exploring electives that general education students are afforded the opportunity to experience.

Limiting imagination, perhaps via the reduction of elective courses, may lead to social-emotional attrition. Sometimes we lose sight of this as we pore over data, Individualized Education Programs (IEP), standardized assessments, and other identity texts. These texts may be “associated with accountability discourses in the nexus of practice in some school cultures [and] are enforced explicitly” (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014, p. 21).

Furthermore, many students begin to attend their annual IEP meetings with their teachers and parents once they enter middle school, a legal requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (IDEA, 2004) Students attend meetings to learn more about their educational goals, as well as their classroom and test accommodations. They also provide input on their long-term and short-term personal aspirations. Additionally, students develop career goals during IEP meetings. They may record, on their IEP, that they want to become a graphic designer. This document helps their school counselor to determine appropriate classes for subsequent school years.

Typically, students feel overwhelmed after they attend their first IEP meeting. However, it is the first step in ownership of their strengths and needs as a student with a disability. We want our students to understand their disability, so they can advocate for themselves in spaces where people do not know or understand their needs. Self-advocacy is the ultimate IEP goal.

In instances such as this, where one student is the focus of the IEP meeting, administrators, teachers, parents, and the student sit around one table to discuss one student and their unique attributes. At the meeting, we peek into students' "interior lives" which allows us to "develop diversity consciousness" and learn how to value their strengths and needs. (Medina et al, 2018) Then, we develop a proposal to bolster their learning with an IEP. Relatedly, Stetsenko & Ho (2015) made an interesting point: "(f)or young children, it is a challenge to have their own voices heard, yet it is even a bigger challenge to have their voices forged" (pp. 231-232). Thus, self-advocacy should be encouraged, and diversity should be honored at all IEP meetings. This will lead to greater self-confidence as students return to their classrooms with a heightened sense of self-awareness. I believe this will also translate to self-advocacy, and an increase of instructional resources that accurately reflects the students within the classroom.

(Additional relevant terms within *Appendix A*)

Research Design

Researcher Role

I had access to an inclusion (general and special education students and teachers) classroom at Hopkins Middle School (pseudonym). I worked at this school as a speech-language specialist in the past, so I have a good relationship with the administrators, as well as several of the teachers. Additionally, I conducted a pilot study at this school for an LCLE course, so I obtained permission to interview participants at this site years ago.

Participants

Mrs. Horton (pseudonym) is a middle school general education English teacher. She is a married, thirty-year-old woman. Mrs. Horton was raised in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

in a middle-class family. She is currently in graduate school, pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership. Mrs. Horton teaches in the team-taught and general education settings.

Ms. Jones (pseudonym) is a special education teacher in the seventh year of her teaching career. She is a twenty-nine-year-old single woman. Ms. Jones was raised in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in a working-class family. She earned a master's degree in special education from a major public university. Ms. Jones teaches middle school English in team-taught and self-contained classrooms throughout the school year.

Ms. Jones and Mrs. Horton co-teach sixteen general education students and six special education students during a third period English course. I interviewed these two teachers to learn more about their processes for selecting instructional resources for students with disabilities.

Researcher/Teacher Relationships

To fulfill my role as the Hopkins Middle School speech-language specialist, I "pushed-in" to Mrs. Horton's team-taught class each week. There, I enjoyed co-teaching and conducting speech and language therapy. As previously mentioned, Mrs. Horton is also in graduate school, so she has a level of understanding regarding my research interests and duties. When I asked Mrs. Horton if I could interview her for graduate school, she quickly obliged.

I believe that researchers can have a high level of comfortability with their participants and maintain credibility of their data. I intend to continue to create a safe, inviting, semi-formal space for my interviewees. Mrs. Horton understood that this was a professional task, but she also felt comfortable enough to share a few personal stories about herself. This is a balancing act that I have committed to because I wish to continue to interview people that I like, know, and trust.

This balancing act reminds me of the yin and yang symbol, which represents the concept of dualism. In the modern world, we understand it as the adage "opposites attract." Two opposites

may appear, at first, incompatible, but they can be interconnected, and work well together.

Similarly, we may dually present formal and informal interview techniques, as it may be beneficial to connect these opposite concepts, such as during an interview.

Overview of Research Methods

I collected qualitative data in the form of informal and semi-structured interviews, as well as observations, to promote a deeper understanding of curricular representation of children with disabilities. All interviews were audio-recorded, with consent from participants. Interviews were conducted after school, in the teacher's classroom. This location choice provided an opportunity for teachers to physically disclose the various resources that they mentioned during their interviews, regardless of if it was an in-person or virtual classroom. I asked educators a series of questions regarding text selection for students with disabilities.

Classroom observations were also conducted. Additionally, I wrote contemporaneous analytical memoranda during observations in order to best preserve my initial reactions.

Limitations of the Study

The onset of the SARS CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic presented novel obstacles to data collection. A great deal of daily activities were affected by the proliferation of the infectious disease and the related reactions by governmental bodies. Additionally, the commencement of in-person instruction was suspended at my research site for a period of time.

Furthermore, a deficit mindset is ingrained into my role as a clinician. At times, it negatively affected my ability to objectively observe and discern occurrences in the field. Accordingly, I often unwittingly perceived occurrences through the prism of a clinician when I should have assumed the lens of an unbiased researcher. I aimed to remain cognizant of this issue, throughout my study, and I wrote in a reflective journal.

Finally, because my participants are teachers and I interviewed them about their decision-making, I relied on mutual trust to further my research study. For instance, I trusted that my participants shared truthful and reliable representations of their experiences in selecting texts for students with learning disabilities. Biases may have entered self-reported data as teachers examined their practices through their own lenses.

Potential Ethical Issues

A few potential ethical issues needed to be addressed at my field site. As the product of a general education K-12 program of study, I forced myself to be cognizant of my battle to restrain any preconceived notions about special education, or the depth of this subculture's belief (or disbelief) in alternative pedagogies. While the subjects of my study are undoubtedly fascinating, scholars warn us that as researchers, we often "carry our sense of place into any research project" (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006, p. 133). Furthermore, the danger of the intercession of my implicit biases as a researcher (i.e., attempting to fit the qualitative data into the parameters set by the field researcher) risks overlooking the true story being told by the data. This lack of objectivity could be a disservice to the participants of the study.

Conclusion

Oftentimes, students with differences in oral and written language demonstrate difficulty with self-advocacy, and they continue to struggle with this skill as they become adults. In this study, I interviewed educators and students to gain a stronger understanding of the curricular representation of children with learning disabilities. Little is known about teacher experiences surrounding text selection for students with learning disabilities. Moreover, this study will attempt

to ascertain how the thought processes of educators of children with disabilities from neurodiverse backgrounds dictate the collection of texts within classrooms.

My research study focuses on the importance of incorporating texts that portray children with disabilities to promote inclusion and social justice for marginalized groups. The more we learn about individuals that are unlike ourselves, the stronger we become as a society. A shared resource, such as a book, is a great way to start the conversation.

Educators that help students realize the political consequences of their education provide a life skill that will last throughout adulthood. If this life skill is attained, and power is granted, then students may be able to produce a positive shift within their classrooms, or even their schools. “Challenging the unquestioned legitimacy of unequal power relationships by studying the relationship between language and power” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383) will revolutionize the structure of the education system and transform literacy practices as we know it. Consequently, it is important for educators to grant their students the agency and power that is required to generate these positive changes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Educators possess the unique power to promote awareness, empathy, and acceptance of students with disabilities with the texts educators select for their classrooms. As Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) stated, “These books make difference visible, give voice to those traditionally silenced, explore dominant systems of meaning in our society, question why certain groups are positioned as others, and show how people can begin to take action on important issues” (p. 384).

This study intends to promote a greater level of awareness surrounding the deliberation with which stakeholders select instructional resources to educate children with learning disabilities. The potential answers to these research questions are pertinent to the field of literacy, culture, and language education (LCLE). A tremendous amount of LCLE research illuminates the power of inclusion within the world of education, specifically within the context of race and ethnicity in culturally diverse classrooms. Relatedly, I am interested in learning whether educators allocate resources to the exploration of academically diverse learning environments. This research aims to ascertain whether the same theories, concepts, and principles of inclusion translate to more positive outcomes within learning environments of children with learning disabilities.

The following review of literature seeks to clarify the different pedagogical approaches to teaching students with learning disabilities via young adult literature that includes characters with disabilities. Viewing the field of special education curriculum with a critical literacy theory lens, this review demonstrates how several selected readings are of utmost importance when teaching children with special needs because “identity, agency, and power shape the novels’ plots and themes” (Curwood, 2013, p.15).

In recent years, the research and literature on the diversification of curricula have indicated exciting possibilities. In a number of studies, research has indicated that the diversification of literature may result in students being better positioned to relate, and therefore identify, with characters within young adult literature. A great deal of the traditional literature, studied within the United States, emanates from a “more conventional collection of texts by and about only European American straight males” (Athanases, 1998, p. 292). In past studies, students who were introduced to diverse literature “learned about experiences of diverse characters in diverse groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual identity formation” (Athanases, 1998, p. 291). Through these revelations, students were able to transcend archaic and antiquated stereotypes in lieu of fresher perspectives.

Teachers have often had considerable autonomy over the narrative within their classrooms and sometimes, the types of books students read. Consequently, when teachers select a particular text, they must consider the sociopolitical implications of their actions. (Mills, 2016)

As educators aim to reposition their practice, they must ask themselves if they are selecting appropriate texts for their students. For example, if a high school English teacher is tasked to select a novel about a historically significant American exodus, will he/she choose *The Grapes of Wrath* about a white family coerced to move from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression or *The Warmth of Other Suns* regarding the Great Migration of Black Americans from the south to the north? Equally, if a kindergarten teacher notices his/her typically developing students are not accepting of their classmates with disabilities, should he/she choose a book that discusses how every child is alike or a book about students with learning differences? The exclusionary dominance of these traditional literary forms should be challenged in order to promote diverse literacy, culture, and language education. To better understand what teachers must consider when

selecting texts, the next section reviews current research on critical literacy and how it relates to students with learning disabilities.

As Shor (1999) suggests, critical literacy:

[C]hallenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development. This kind of literacy--words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society--connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 2)

Furthermore, critical literacy derives from critical theory and consists of “reading texts with a critical eye; considering multiple viewpoints; and having class discussions or projects related to race, class, power, gender, language, and social justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 385). The historical implications of literacy play a foundational role in the understanding of social justice in our classrooms.

According to Mills (2016):

Since the 1990s, critical theories have addressed the social relations of capitalist production, globalisation, institutional hierarchies, the reproduction of inequity and false beliefs that impinge on everyday practices (Young, 1992). Oppression is experienced in many parts of the world in the form of inadequate educational provision for certain groups, such as those in poverty, racial and migrant groups, those with disabilities, rural communities, females and children. (Loc. 1283)

Moreover, critical literacy holds that “all texts are crafted objects, written by persons with particular dispositions or orientations to the information, regardless of how factual or neutral the products may attempt to be” (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 13). Further investigation (related to

critical theory, critical literacy, and children with disabilities) has informed me that I must “redefine literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). As I research the implications of advocacy and self-advocacy, I continuously discover profound political influence in the field of education.

Review of Literature

Students with learning disabilities comprise roughly 5% of the total population of school-aged children. (Hehir, 2002) Of the population of children with learning disabilities, children with dyslexia represent about 80% of those who are school-aged. In many instances, researchers applied the term dyslexia or learning disability to describe characters’ learning challenges. These two terms lack consistent definitions within young adult literature and are often affixed to students through biased assessment processes. They also tend to invoke a narrow view of the complex and individual nature of learning. (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014)

The high prevalence of this learning disability, and our unwillingness to effectively address it as a society, is leading to long-term negative impacts. A National Longitudinal Transition Study found that among a large sample size of high school students, children with learning disabilities were nearly twice as likely as neurotypical students to drop out of school. (Hehir, 2002) While the complexities of combating disparities caused by learning disabilities is complex, the very structure of our schooling systems may be complicit in achieving such negative outcomes.

In *Eliminating Ableism in Education*, Hehir (2002) suggests that:

ableism (i.e. a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities) has deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media,

combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable is yet another latent obstacle for children with learning disabilities. (Hehir, 2002 p. 3)

Hehir (2002) offers research indicating that ableist tendencies lead to the “devaluation of disability results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids, etc.” (Hehir, 2002, p. 3). As a consequence, many educators have a preference for disabled students to perform in the same manner as neurotypical students.

According to Hehir (2002), there are effective ways by which neurodivergent students can access the general education curriculum. Educators “may have to modify some deeply held beliefs about what constitutes acceptable student performance” in order for neurodivergent students to benefit from these technologies (Hehir, 2002, p. 13). In many institutions, special education students are required to perform on grade-level or higher in order to be mainstreamed, or included, into general education classes. Inevitably, entrenched powers will defend rigidity in text selection and curriculum curation as a means to maintain standards. However, for neurodivergent students, this approach will likely lead to lower educational outcomes.

Relatedly, ableist assumptions may be impeding the effective education of children with disabilities. This is linked to the reluctance to intervene on behalf of children experiencing marked difficulty with learning to read. Some of this reluctance may be due to a lack of appropriate options or inadequate teacher preparation. (Lyon et al., 2001) However, some of this inaction may be due to the disinterest of schools to label children, which undoubtedly reflects the deep stigma associated with disability in our society. The mere label of a disability carries such negative

connotations that many educators and some parents seek to avoid it. Another reason that some may evade labeling is the fact that it can result in inferior special education placements. Special education placements often beget a series of events which stigmatize and, at times, coddle the student with a disability through learned helplessness.

Finally, the federal definition of a learning disability, which requires that a child exhibit a discrepancy between their intelligence quotient (IQ) and performance, may also inhibit early intervention. That is, the child must first fail to learn the material before parents and educators can establish eligibility for special education services (Hehir, 2002).

Representation of Disability in Youth Literature

In *Exploring Issues of Disability in Children's Literature Discussions*, Adomat expanded the definition of multicultural literature to include individuals who have been underrepresented in stories because of race, gender, sexual preference, and disability. (Adomat 2014; Galda, 2013) I am most concerned with the last marginalized community on this list because there is a relative rarity and/or scarcity of literacy materials that feature children with disabilities. Moreover, Prater (2003) noted that when a child with a disability is portrayed as a character within a children's book or young adult literature, the author typically depicts him/her as hopeless and destitute with a physical disability, such as paralysis or blindness. Furthermore, according to Prater (2003), many of these characters have supporting roles, rather than leading parts, and as a result, have very little influence or impact on the story as a whole. Children with *hidden disabilities*, which may include learning disabilities, are very rarely depicted as the main character. (Prater, 2003)

Prater (2003) analyzed several young adult novels containing characters with learning disabilities. They presented with deficits in written language, as well as reading and writing disorders, which required direct instruction in a small classroom setting. Some characters had an

intellectual disability. Characters with an intellectual disability were commonly represented as the supporting character in the novel. (Prater, 2003)

There are several recurring themes in the novels analyzed by Prater: 1) learning strengths (e.g., better at math than reading), 2) misbehavior, 3) self-esteem, 4) diagnosis, 5) placement, 6) instructional methodology, 7) teasing, and 8) teaming up with other children with disabilities. In the end, Prater encouraged teachers to read any, and all, texts with characters with disabilities. Even if the text is inappropriate and outdated, it can still be utilized as an example of what not to do. (Prater, 2003)

In *Analyzing the Portrayal of Characters with Learning Difficulties in Realistic Fiction*, Jozwik & Rice (2020) highlighted books for adolescent readers featuring authentic representations of characters with reading difficulties. The intent of the research was to encourage language arts and special education teachers to incorporate diverse curricula into activities centered on classroom community building, self-discovery, and reading from a critical literacy perspective. Jozwik & Rice (2020) analyzed the portrayal of main characters with reading difficulties featured in contemporary realistic fiction.

As an aside, Jozwik & Rice (2020) were very specific about selecting materials for the study. In order for literature to be considered dynamic and positive, literary material had to include characters who experienced positive interactions with at least one other character; change or develop throughout the story; and accept, address, and/or compensate for their reading challenges in a realistic way. Realism was determined by the manner in which challenges were resolved (i.e., solutions could not be quick fixes or sudden cures). Furthermore, Jozwik & Rice (2020) agreed that the plot must reveal the abilities, strengths, and weaknesses of the character.

Jozwik & Rice (2020) concluded “all students can benefit from reading books that feature positive portrayals of characters with reading difficulties” (Jozwik, 2020, p. 173). Among the reviewed books, most characters were white and conformed to binary gender categories. According to Jozwik & Rice (2020), this indicates a need for wider representation of diverse characters in classroom curricula.

In addition, Jozwik & Rice (2020) found that characters fulfill meaningful roles as actors in the broader world. In actuality, the existence of reading challenges does not preclude characters from leading full and productive lives. Despite this, oftentimes, textual themes serve to confirm pervasive misconceptions related to reading difficulties. In integrating these books into classroom literary events, language arts, and special education, instructors can take action to support students in reading these texts from a critical literacy perspective. (Jozwik & Rice, 2020)

Our Similarities

As typically developing young adults read books about characters with disabilities, they become more cognizant of the similarities and connections that they have with these characters. In a study performed by Adomat (2014), teachers were concerned because general education students were not accepting of the special education students in their class (i.e., children with learning disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and developmental disabilities). Educators read various stories about children with disabilities to their class. Subsequently, students divided into small groups to discuss and analyze texts. During these discussions, children began to ask questions, such as “What is normal?” and grew to understand the vast spectrum of individuality. (Adomat, 2014)

In *Using Young Adult Literature to Develop Content Knowledge of Autism for Preservice Teachers*, Hughes, Hunt-Barron, Wagner, & Evering (2014) revealed comparable findings.

Authors discussed a similar issue from a different perspective; however, they noted changes seen in educators who read young adult literature that included characters with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). These preservice teachers reported that they had never had an extensive conversation with a person with a disability. The study demonstrated the impact that a novel can have on a group of adults; imagine the impression it could leave on adolescents. Reading young adult literature with main characters with disabilities increased preservice teachers' knowledge of their commonalities with differently abled individuals.

Black & Tsumoto (2018) also endeavored to demonstrate how children with ASD in young adult literature are more similar to their peers than unique. The authors analyzed award-winning novels and found that most characters with ASD were typically described as “quirky geniuses” with a few sensory issues, such as sensitivity to light. These characters with ASD also demonstrated rigidity in that they negatively reacted to changes in routine. All of the novels employed a first-person perspective of a child with ASD and average cognitive ability. Black & Tsumoto (2018) also addressed the importance of including characters with ASD in young adult literature. When educators utilize books that portray children with disabilities in their classrooms, it allows for wonderful conversation starters surrounding advocacy and representation.

Educators can engage students in topics about people with disabilities, and promote rich discussions around themes of oppression, politics, culture, and social justice for groups of people that have limited agency and power. Black & Tsumoto (2018) encouraged readers to learn more about people with ASD and the challenges people with ASD may face, which can also lead to greater advocacy for students with disabilities. (Black & Tsumoto, 2018) Furthermore, it seems that cognitive behaviors and development are influenced, if not also dictated, by the context of the literature and affect the meaning that learners attribute to the curriculum.

In the end, “just as culture affects the intellectual effects of literacy, so too does culture affect the process of learning to be literate” (Langer, 1986, p. 13). To properly take inventory of the intercourse between culture and literacy, it is necessary to “look at the ways people acquire literacy, and at the social environments and institutions in which literacy learning takes place and is used” (Langer, 1986, p. 14). Similarly, cognitive growth “occurs as much from outside as the inside” (Ong, 1982, p. 109). The manner in which neurodivergent children become literate, when juxtaposed against their distinctive culture, becomes quite thorny. Specifically, in my experience, the student participants in my study have thus far been unable to perceive the existence of their disabilities and/or any disparity between abilities within the context of literacy. Thus, drawing inferences based on distinctive culture becomes difficult.

Our Differences

While conducting inquiry, it can become easy to define children with special needs by their disability. Van Hart (2012) highlighted the distinctions, calling upon authors to continue to debunk misguided views of the ASD community as monolithic. Van Hart (2012) writes, “[i]f you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” Further, Van Hart (2012) advocates for the term *autism spectrum disorder* to be interpreted in the literal sense i.e., each person with ASD will exhibit various levels of sensory responses, repetitive behaviors, language impairment, theory of mind, and social abilities. (Van Hart, 2012)

Van Hart (2012) also discussed her experience of growing up with two brothers with ASD and analyzed young adult novels that portray characters with ASD. Van Hart (2012) noted that neurotypical members of society demonstrate difficulty separating the person from the disability. Many people outside of the ASD community want to *fix* people with ASD. The purpose of the article is to shed light on young adults (real and fictional) with ASD and to encourage teachers to

use these novels to foster a greater understanding of neurodivergent individuals, such as those with ASD.

Educators should be aware of their biases, as well as the fine line between educating and proselytizing. Teachers that utilize their single voice to preach to a class about personal views and beliefs are rarely effective. Classroom discussions that include all students are of peak importance. Typically developing children can become more compassionate about students with disabilities (those in the literature and the students in their class). Children may begin to ask questions and view circumstances from different perspectives. In turn, their awareness will heighten, which will encourage them to consider these social justice issues.

The Importance of Inclusion

To make meaningful progress, literacy and inclusion should be viewed as fundamental rights. This begins with “making difference visible (Harste et al., 2000)” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). A gamut of educators should be knowledgeable about students with disabilities and how their disabilities manifest in various academic settings, circumstances, and situations. Understandably, a student with a disability must have a special educator on his/her team, but he/she must have a principal, general education teacher, instructional assistant/paraprofessional, and special area teachers to support him/her as well.

Siegel and Valtierra (2017) examined narrow, ability-focused teacher dispositions and how they perpetuate low expectations to deny students with disabilities access to meaningful educational experiences. Authors intimated that by developing a more inclusive literacy disposition, neurodivergent children would be able to access robust learning experiences. Researchers found the impact of the dispositions of teachers towards curriculum and literacy regarding children with disabilities had profound effects. (Siegel and Valtierra, 2017) Relatedly,

"[l]ow academic expectations cast a long shadow over students with disabilities and directly influence[d] literacy instruction that teachers either provide[d] or with[e]ld from students" (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 94). Therefore, to demonstrate true progress, children with disabilities and their instructors must transcend low expectations.

In order to establish classrooms where all students are included in literacy experiences, teachers must "embody dispositions that demonstrate a belief in the universal capacity to learn" (Siegel & Valtierra, 2017, p. 96). A shift from narrow, ability-orientated dispositions to more expansive and inclusive environments should become hallmarks of future classrooms. Teachers can personify a perspective that demonstrates a belief in the universal capacity to learn. (Siegel & Valtierra, 2017)

Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond (2015) noted that the failure teachers perceive in their students, due to their ableist beliefs, is virtually guaranteed. Authors aimed to examine the influences on special education teachers' decisions and perceptions about literacy for students with disabilities. Researchers interviewed several special education teachers who were able to identify key influences on their decisions. Such influences were grouped into four categories: 1) contexts; 2) beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; 3) expectations; and 4) self-efficacy. (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015)

Of the core categories, self-efficacy played the most central role in determining how teachers' beliefs and contexts interacted to influence literacy decisions. "The belief that individuals with extensive needs for support cannot acquire literacy skills often results in a lack of opportunity to learn these skills and therefore becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 92)" (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015, p. 210). Furthermore, teachers who feel that their pedagogical approach may not be effective may choose to abdicate their responsibilities in the

classroom. Unfortunately, this means that teacher beliefs can lead to student failure. (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015).

Conclusion

This review concludes there is a lack of representation of students with intellectual and learning disabilities in young adult literature. This is a national social justice issue in the field of education, specifically for students that never see themselves proportionally represented within the literature selected for them by administrators and teachers. Prior research challenges researchers and stakeholders to “redefine literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance” (Giroux, 2011). I plan to address this social justice issue through a critical literacy approach. If educators suppress the creativity of their students and discourage the production of innovative texts and discourses, then students will have limited agency and power. Further research on this topic is needed in order to confront the forces and structures that continue to constrain educational resources for and about students with disabilities.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

My research study focuses on the effects of text selection for and by children with learning disabilities. I explored the selection of texts in special and general education middle school English Language Arts classrooms through observations and interviews with educators. This study attempts to deduce how and why educators of children with disabilities choose the collection of texts within their classrooms. I concluded my analysis by focusing on how the lack of representation of children with disabilities in young adult literature can lead to issues surrounding advocacy and representation. Specifically, I examined the dispositions of the teachers within the context of text selection in furtherance of an effort to better understand the awareness of ableism in literature and classroom text selection. Because I observed and interviewed both special and general education teachers about their practice, I utilized a qualitative research approach: practitioner inquiry. I gathered information from interviews to develop a plan to help the teachers that I worked with at the middle school. This plan also helped me to enrich my practices as a speech and language specialist. As a collective, I hope we will all continue to improve the methods in which we select inclusive texts for classroom instruction.

Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner inquiry is defined as the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own practice. (Cochran, Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009) This inquiry examined the practice of text selection for students with disabilities in secondary English Language Arts classrooms. Teachers revealed their methods and behaviors during formal and informal interviews. Later, I analyzed the interview data in order to improve teacher practices. (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) I acquired additional knowledge regarding best practice and shared this information with my participants, as well as

other educators, so we could enhance our pedagogical approaches. (Oberg, 1990) Through better understanding of the factors which affect text selection, participants may achieve a keener sense of awareness of implicit biases, such as ableism, that are seldom discussed between educators.

Thus, a practitioner inquiry approach helped me to accomplish my goal of learning more about the behaviors of teachers in everyday settings. This knowledge assisted me with my secondary goal to improve my practice as a speech and language specialist. By learning from my successes and mistakes, I hope to become a better educator. I utilized interview data to develop strategies for book choices for students with disabilities so that they may see themselves reflected in their curricular texts.

Setting of the Study

Hopkins Middle School (pseudonym) opened as Hopkins Intermediate School in September 1960. At the time, it was one of the only schools of its kind in the county. In the past, students attended elementary school from first through seventh grade, and high school from eighth through twelfth grade. Students presented with much difficulty with this transition, so the Green County Public Schools (pseudonym) superintendent proposed to open intermediate schools throughout the county containing seventh and eighth grades.

Hopkins Middle School is located in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. The town is full of rich, historical culture. President George Washington's city and country homes are located here. Many federal government employees and military personnel reside in this town because of its close proximity to the nation's capital.

My participants are teachers at Hopkins Middle School. I worked closely with both teachers via an inclusion model where special and general education teachers and students were in the same classroom. I typically visited the classroom twice per week because several of the special

education students were on my caseload for in-class speech and language therapy. I recorded data for the students with speech and language IEP goals in order to advance their oral and written language needs. Even though I was assigned to a small percentage of students, I worked with all the students in the classroom and assisted in any way I could. I also met with teachers on a weekly basis to discuss student progress.

Both teachers, Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones (pseudonyms), signed a consent form and agreed to participate in my research study. I conducted teacher interviews in-person and asked several open-ended questions in order to gather additional information. All interviews were recorded, with consent from participants. Interviews were conducted after school, in the teacher's classroom. This provided an opportunity for teachers to show me the various resources that they mentioned during their interviews.

Research Participants

To be selected as a participant for this research study, I preferred for the individual to be middle school (i.e., seventh or eighth grade) English Language Arts special or general education teachers at Hopkins Middle School. I was interested in both special and general educators because I wished to know more about how their training influenced their practice. The Hopkins Middle School setting was chosen as a matter of convenience as I was the speech-language specialist at the school, and I aimed to conduct in-person interviews afterschool.

Mrs. Horton (pseudonym) is a middle school, general education, English teacher. Mrs. Horton was raised in the Northeast in a middle-class family. She is currently in graduate school, pursuing a master's degree. Mrs. Horton has been teaching in team-taught (i.e., inclusion class that is a combined general and special education class) and general education settings for seven years.

Ms. Jones (pseudonym) is a special education teacher in the seventh year of her teaching career. She earned a master's degree in special education from a major public university. Ms. Jones teaches middle school English in team-taught and self-contained classrooms throughout the school year.

Ms. Jones and Mrs. Horton co-teach sixteen general education students and six special education students during a third period English course. I interviewed these two teachers to learn more about their processes for selecting instructional resources for students with learning disabilities.

I first met Ms. Jones in August 2017 at a special education department meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to acclimate new and returning teachers to the school's special education policies and procedures. I was drawn to sit next to Ms. Jones because she was drinking out of a thermos from my alma mater. I felt comfortable sitting next to this individual because, without speaking to her, I knew that we had a shared experience. I quickly uttered, "Go XU!" to which she enthusiastically replied, "You went to [XU], too?"

I worked with Ms. Jones at least twice per week to teach students oral and written language skills. At the end of the first month of school, I asked Ms. Jones if I could observe her classroom for a school project. She immediately exclaimed, "Yes!"

Since I regularly pushed-in (i.e., administer speech-language therapy in a student's classroom), I did not feel like an interloper. I interacted with both teachers and all the students. When a student raised his hand to ask a question, and the other two teachers were busy assisting other students, I attended to the student and answered his questions to the best of my ability. Several of the children in this English class were on my caseload for speech-language therapy, but

I helped and taught all the students. I felt comfortable during the length of the observation, and engaged with everyone, regardless of their affiliation.

Ms. Jones had a unique approach to instruction. In her class, Ms. Jones embraced a blended model of instruction which incorporated elements of both passive and active instruction. It is quite rare for me to see two teachers, one special education and one general education teacher, working in tandem such as this.

When visiting team-taught classrooms in the past, I observed a classroom where the special education teacher was silent. She did not contribute to classroom instruction. Instead, she stood in the back of the classroom while the general education teacher provided direct instruction. If a special education student appeared as though he was not paying attention, then the special teacher would hurriedly walk over to his desk and redirect him.

My observation of Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones increased my level of respect for this blended model, the combination of general and special education teachers and students, because it robustly promotes inclusion. I would even go as far as to view this hodgepodge of individuals as its own unique subculture. As I sharpened my listening skills, I have grown to appreciate this field site even more.

Each of the instructor participants were ideal for this study, due to their diverse capabilities and specialties. I developed a strong professional relationship with both teachers, which afforded the opportunity to ask tough questions. This is key to the success of implementing future critical literacy conversations. Further, this type of classroom allowed for the examination of both special and general education components, because of its dynamic combination of neurodivergent and neurotypical students within one unified classroom.

Data Collection Procedures

This practitioner inquiry focused on the circumstances surrounding text selection by teachers, and the utilization of educational resources featuring characters from non-traditional and/or neurodivergent backgrounds. The parameters of the study surround a community of middle school general and special education teachers and students within a seventh grade, English Language Arts classroom.

I collected qualitative data in the form of informal and semi-structured interviews, as well as observations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent from participants (see *Appendix B*). Interviews were conducted after school in the teacher's classroom. This location provided an opportunity for teachers to physically disclose the various resources they mentioned during their interviews.

I observed the classroom environment once per month. Morning observations provided ample access to both teachers, the teaching assistant, and a wide variety of students. Furthermore, I examined the method of deliberation and overall process of teachers choosing educational resources. Specifically, I analyzed the pedagogical approach of teachers to better ascertain whether there was a common theme to the approach of delivering lessons to students with learning disabilities. Additionally, I investigated how students received and experienced their educational materials.

I asked educators a series of questions, for approximately 45 minutes, regarding text selection for students with learning disabilities. Sample interview questions include:

1. What motivated you to become a teacher?
3. What type of non-academic support do you provide to your students?
4. How comfortable do you feel with interacting with children with disabilities?

5. Tell me about the available reading materials in your classroom.
 6. What are your criteria for book selection for your classroom?
 7. How much autonomy do you have in the selection of educational media to instruct your students?
 8. What is the school's formal administrative procurement process for selecting instructional materials for the classroom?
 9. After selection, are you required to receive additional administrative approval of books and media before incorporating them into instruction?
 10. What types of diverse characters (e.g., religion, race, gender, abilities/disabilities, etc.) do you look for when you select instructional materials?
 11. Do you believe there is a proportionate representation of children with disabilities in instructional materials?
 12. Can you describe your experience in researching and obtaining instructional materials with different types of characters?
 13. How do your students influence your curriculum or lesson planning?
 14. Are students encouraged to select a certain type of book for assignments? If so, how?
 15. How important is it for students with disabilities to read about other students with disabilities?
 16. How important is it for neurotypical students to read about students with disabilities?
 17. What is your biggest challenge when working with children with disabilities?
 18. What is the greatest reward you receive when working with children with disabilities?
- I utilized emic vocabulary such as *IEP*, *mainstream*, *self-contained*, and *team-taught* during my interviews with general and special educators. Because I possessed a certain level of insider

knowledge, I was able to efficiently interact with these special educators utilizing this particular vocabulary. Fortunately, I understood and employed this language quite frequently as a school-based speech-language specialist. (See *Appendix A* for a glossary of relevant special education terms).

I also observed the text selection process from its inception. I gathered data on the processes contemplated before text recommendation and I investigated the perception of the teachers upon providing the recommendation. Finally, I conducted a follow-up interview with each teacher, years later, regarding their experiences with the text selection process.

Data Analysis Procedures

The primary question of my research study is concerned with text selection for special education students; this was my initial code. After I developed the initial code, I expounded upon the text selection process by highlighting major topics within transcripts. These major topics became my expanded codes. Through the process of narrowing these codes, final codes emerged, which were the methods in which Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones employed to decide which texts would enter their classrooms. These final codes became themes, and each interview participant demonstrated different themes.

I conducted a thematic analysis and developed themes through in-vivo coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, I analyzed what my participant said, and I used the phrasing from her interview to develop approximately three themes for each participant. This method of analysis allowed the codes to emerge organically.

Prior to the development of these themes, I read and re-read the transcripts to omit vague labels for themes and reflected on the interview questions to create descriptive labels instead. This

systematic process was creative and self-reflective in nature in that themes emerged as I ruminated to discover them.

I gathered robust data and developed themes, which emerged after my analysis of Mrs. Horton's and Ms. Jones's words. This amalgamation of each teacher's verbiage and my analysis resulted in the genesis of emergent themes.

Validating the Findings

The standard methods of validating qualitative data (i.e., triangulation) may not be the best fit for my research study. In this study, the intention is to formulate confidence in the validity of the data by establishing confluence in the evidence. In attempts to establish confluence, a researcher typically "compiles bits and pieces of evidence to formulate a 'compelling whole'" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 462). However, I believe the most applicable manner to evaluate this data would be to apply the standard for evaluating postmodern texts, the crystallization method.

In lieu of applying the triangulation method, Creswell & Poth (2018) noted:

A postmodern perspective draws on the metaphorical image of a crystal. Richardson (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) describes this image: I propose that the central imaginary for "validation" for postmodern texts is not the triangle — a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. (p. 462)

In order to properly depict the multidimensionalities and transmutations inherent to the concepts that I would like to relay, the postmodern perspective is most suitable. Finally, at the macro level, I am interested in the methods, or processes, that teachers utilized to select

instructional resources to educate children with disabilities. At the micro level, speech segments are crucial to my research, and I gathered data via interviews and observations.

Structuring the Findings

Prior research challenges researchers and stakeholders to “redefine literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance” (Giroux, 2011, p. 174). In this study, I interviewed teachers to gain a stronger understanding of the curricular representation of children with learning disabilities and how this relates to social justice issues. Very little is known about teacher perceptions surrounding text selection for students within the special education system. Moreover, I attempted to deduce how the rationale of educators of children with disabilities dictates the collection of texts within classrooms.

In the fifth chapter, I will share my findings by describing my codes first and elaborating upon the codes in further detail in the form of various themes. It was not feasible to predetermine all codes and themes; they emerged throughout the process of analyzing the interview data. I attempted to view any qualitative data collected through the lens of these codes and themes with the goal of structuring the data in these terms.

Chapter 4: Setting in Context

What is a Speech-Language Pathologist/Specialist?

Speech-language pathology is the act of diagnosing and treating swallowing disorders and communication disorders. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), “a communication disorder is an impairment in the ability to receive, send, process, and comprehend concepts or verbal, nonverbal and graphic symbol systems” (ASHA, 1993). This may include oral language skills, such as understanding what is being said to you (i.e., receptive language) and producing novel utterances (i.e., expressive language). Speech-language specialists can also address written language skills such as decoding, encoding, and comprehending texts. For example, many speech-language specialists in the private practice setting work with children and adults with reading and writing disorders. In the public school system, these types of disorders are typically addressed by reading specialists and special education teachers. With speech and language therapy, children can overcome perceived disabilities and thrive within the classroom.

What is a Special Education Teacher?

Special education is “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (IDEA, 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was created in 1975 to establish special education laws for students with disabilities from birth to age 21 in public schools. In order to qualify for special education services, students must meet specific criteria. Once they meet the criteria, they are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This means that parents and legal guardians do not have to pay for special education services, and special education students must have as many opportunities as possible to interact with general education students. These conditions are specifically delineated and clearly stated in a child’s Individualized

Education Program (IEP). Parents must consent to the IEP before special educators can administer any type of service, regardless of disability type. The advent of federal programs improves accessibility to treatment and greatly improves the classroom experience for children with disabilities. (IDEA, 2004)

Disability Categories

In the public school system, speech-language therapy is a special education service. Speech or language impairment is one of the fourteen disability categories under IDEA (2004):

1. Autism
2. Deaf-blindness
3. Deafness
4. Developmental delay
5. Emotional disturbance
6. Hearing impairment
7. Intellectual disability
8. Multiple disabilities
9. Orthopedic impairment
10. Other health impairment
11. Specific learning disability
12. Speech or language impairment
13. Traumatic brain injury
14. Visual impairment

As a public-school speech-language specialist, most of my students qualified for special education services under the following categories: speech or language impairment (such as

articulation, stuttering, or language disorders), specific learning disability (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia), and other health impairment (such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder). These are considered *high-incidence disabilities* because the rate of occurrence is higher than that of the other eleven disabilities. Some educators also refer to them as *hidden disabilities* because they are difficult to observe (Dragoo, 2020). The meticulous categorization of disabilities assists teachers with identifying and treating neurodivergent children.

Pull Out/Push-In Intervention

At the secondary level, I pulled students out of their classrooms for therapy to treat speech disorders, including (but not limited to) stuttering and pronouncing speech sounds. For students with language disorders, I preferred to enter their language-based classrooms and provide language therapy in a natural environment. English/language arts, reading, and social skills classes were an ideal environment to practice language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, fluency, comprehension, and pragmatics. This is referred to as the pull-out/push-in intervention model. The model provides an individualized treatment approach to accommodate children with disabilities in a natural environment.

I treated approximately 50-60 students with communication disorders each school year. The number of students on my caseload fluctuated as I dismissed students for meeting their goals, students moved to various specialty schools within the school district or to different school districts, or parents withdrew their children from special education services. For instance, some parents revoked IEPs prior to their children entering high school because they aimed to omit any evidence of a disability, as they believed being associated with the special education system would hurt the student's chances of succeeding in "the real world." Unfortunately, the stigma of having a disability, or being perceived as having a disability, fosters negative attitudes toward

acknowledging and continually treating disabilities in the classroom for parents and guardians of students with disabilities.

Individualized Education Programs

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a legal document that describes the personalized plan for a special education student. It includes goals, objectives, accommodations, and service hours specific to a particular student. IEPs fall under IDEA, which means they apply to public school students in the United States; private schools are not required to provide IEPs. Under IDEA, private schools may offer IEPs to students with disabilities at the school's discretion (IDEA, 2004).

First, someone must refer a student for an evaluation. This could be a parent, teacher, speech-language specialist, or any other faculty member with concerns. Once the parent signs consent, the school team must perform a series of evaluations. Formal assessments may include the Woodcock–Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities by a school psychologist, the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement by a special education teacher, a sociocultural assessment by a social worker, or the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation by a speech-language specialist. Informal assessments such as a teacher narrative, observation, writing sample, record review, or parent report are also pertinent to the testing process. After the school team gathers all the necessary data via formal and informal measures, they meet with the parents to review the reports and determine if the student has a disability. Later, they meet again to develop an IEP. This entire process lasts about 90 days (IDEA, 2004).

The team meets on an annual basis to update and revise the IEP. Once the student is in college, he/she will no longer have an IEP. However, the college can continue to provide accommodations through disability services. Potential accommodations at the collegiate level are

numerous and may span from students receiving more time on examinations to receiving the assistance of a scribe on written assignments (IDEA, 2004).

Accommodations are adaptations to the educational environment, also known as supplementary aids and services. These are implemented to help students overcome educational barriers to accessing the curriculum. For example, accommodations may include text-to-speech software, frequent breaks, extended time on assessments, and preferential seating, such as sitting in the front of the class. Modifications are frequently confused with accommodations. However, modifications essentially change the curriculum, not the environment. For example, as a modification, a student with a specific learning disability may be permitted to read a book below grade level or complete a homework assignment with fewer questions. Each of these accommodations is implemented to provide greater equity in educational settings (IDEA, 2004).

Figure 1: Example of accommodations on an IEP

Accommodations					
Type	Accommodation List	Accommodation Description	Location	Setting	Amount of Time Frequency
General	break material into manageable parts	for multi step tasks/within classroom setting	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily
General	give short concise directions	when given instructions	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily
General	allow extra time to respond	daily	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily
General	use concrete manipulatives	for academic activities	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily
General	provide immediate feedback	Verbal cueing/prompts as needed	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily
General	visual aids	visual schedule, visual prompts as needed	General/Special Education Classroom	General/Special Education Classroom	daily

IEPs also include goals and objectives, which are revised yearly. A student with a specific learning disability in reading may have a goal such as this on his/her IEP: Given a grade-level reading passage, John will read the passage and answer five inferential comprehension questions

with 80% accuracy across three consecutive assessments. This goal is typically addressed by a special education teacher. As a speech-language specialist, I may write goals for pronunciation skills: John will produce the /s/ sound across all word positions at the conversation level with 80% accuracy across three consecutive sessions. Parents receive quarterly progress reports to track their child's trajectory toward meeting their IEP goals. Any issues, questions, or concerns which may arise upon the parental review of IEP goals and the corresponding progress of the student can be addressed in periodic IEP meetings between families of students with disabilities and school staff (IDEA, 2004).

The IEP team must also include a description of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The least restrictive environment requires that students with disabilities must spend the maximum amount of time with typically developing, i.e., nondisabled classmates. This part of the IEP explicitly states how much time the student will spend in the general education environment. For example, suppose a student requires special education services in a resource room. In that case, this is considered a special education setting or a more restrictive environment. On the other hand, a student may receive special education services in their general education classroom (IDEA, 2004).

Figure 2: Example of service hours, in various instructional settings, on an IEP

Services							
Specially Designed Instruction	Location	Instructional Setting	Amount of Time			Begin Date	End Date
			Minute	# of Times	Frequency		
Academic/Social and Emotional Support	Classroom	Special Education Classroom	300	5	per week	08/10/2022	10/03/2022

Related Services							
The team considered the need for related services and determined that the student is in need of related services.							
Related Services	Location	Instructional Setting	Amount of Time			Begin Date	End Date
			Minute	# of Times	Frequency		
Speech/Language Therapy	Classroom	Special Education/General Education	90	1	every month	08/10/2022	10/03/2022

Inclusion Model

For this dissertation, I examined a classroom containing general and education teachers and students, otherwise known as an inclusion model. When special education students are educated alongside general education students, they have more opportunities to be educated with students without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, which is a part of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Inclusive classrooms “designed to integrate students with and without disabilities into a single learning environment can lead to stronger academic and social outcomes” (Hehir et al., 2016). Additionally, within this model, co-teachers differentiate instruction and use various teaching styles, which can, in turn, lead to greater improvements in students’ language, behavior, motivation, and self-esteem (Cummings, 2022). For the purpose of this study, I examined educational and social outcomes for children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

When I entered the inclusive classroom with the intent to provide speech and language therapy, I became a co-teacher as well. This included preparing, planning, collaborating, and learning. For example, I prepared my lessons with several students’ IEPs in mind while also

adhering to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Standards of Learning (Virginia is one of the few states that does not follow the Common Core State Standards). I also planned my schedule to meet with students in a language-rich environment. I treated students in their English/language arts classroom during this study.

Collaboration was also a key feature of my role as a school-based speech-language specialist. Before entering the classroom, I met with my student's parents, case manager, principal or assistant principal, general education teachers, and special education teachers to develop a specially designed IEP. Finally, I made it a point to learn about the student; I gathered information about their culture, values, likes, dislikes, etc. to adjust my instruction and become familiar with the whole child instead of viewing them as an IEP goal or accommodation. Building rapport with families of children with disabilities is a hallmark of quality care. Fostering awareness and maintaining a collaborative environment helped me to overcome the stigma surrounding the child's disability label as well.

Strengths-Based Approach

I believe in a strengths-based approach to speech-language therapy. The strengths-based approach is a pedagogical method which emphasizes the distinct advantages of the student in efforts to tailor the lesson around that which the student performs well. This approach aims to negate the stigmas and ableist beliefs in education. It is important to learn about the child and what the child can do rather than focusing on the deficits surrounding their disability (Allen et al., 2013).

For the first speech and language session, I do not address therapy goals. Instead, I ask students questions such as:

1. What do you like to do after school?
2. Who do you live with?

3. What kind of food do you like?
4. Which holidays do you celebrate?
5. What is your favorite song right now?

Strengths-based education is a learner-centered approach to teaching that helps students identify, articulate, and apply their individual skills relevant to their learning needs. Based on social work, positive psychology and business research, a strengths-based approach can help build student confidence, encourage efficacious behaviors, and support life-long learning pursuits. Instead of identifying a student's weaknesses, I seek their strengths and apply them to my teaching style. A strengths-based approach leads to greater motivation and engagement, which can result in increased achievement across academic content and social-emotional development. Additionally, students are driven to learn from educators that are genuinely invested in their success (Allen et al., 2013). This approach offers more favorable outcomes and encourages enthusiasm in the classroom.

Additionally, the strengths-based education approach is based on five core principles. The strengths-based approach supports the ability of teachers to 1) identify and measure student strengths; 2) create individualized learning opportunities; 3) help students network with strength supporters; 3) provide opportunities for students to develop, enhance, and integrate new strengths; and 5) advise for strengths development (Allen et al., 2013). Each of these principles aims to establish valuable characteristics fundamental to lifelong learning. Equally, the strengths-based approach works to disrupt the ableist social mores of educators and families of children with disabilities, which often thwart students' progress.

The Problem in the Local Context

Throughout my decade-long career as a speech-language specialist, I have attended hundreds of IEP meetings. These meetings follow a predictable sequence, as required by law.

However, as previously stated, the meetings alter quite a bit as students begin to attend their IEP meetings at age 14. Often, this is the first moment a student is made aware of his/her disability. In my experience, parents do not reveal diagnoses to their children because they believe this undisclosed piece of information protects them from harm.

Students have confided in me and communicated that they feel “different” from their peers. I have received various questions: “Why do I have to come to speech with you? Why do my friends have one teacher, but I have three teachers in one classroom? Why does it take me longer to finish a test? Why can’t I read?” Students have called themselves dumb, losers, or failures because they did not understand the nature of their disability.

On the other hand, when I worked with middle schoolers aware of their disability, they regularly advocated for themselves. These self-aware students reminded their teachers that they required time and a half on assessments or voice-to-text software to prosper in the academic setting, for example. Empowered students understand their learning styles, strengths, needs, and the tools they need to succeed.

Learning about self-advocacy is crucial to adolescence, especially for students with disabilities. However, there is an age-old debate: who should reveal the disability diagnosis to the child? The parent/guardian or the educator/diagnostician? Many believe it is the parent’s responsibility to discuss the disability, and its characteristics, with their child. However, at age 14, the law requires the educator to invite the child to the IEP meeting, which ultimately discloses the diagnosis by the nature of the subject matter of the meeting. The baton is passed to the teacher at this point, fashioning this scenario into a powerful and pivotal moment in the child’s life. Now, the teacher can utilize his/her knowledge and resources to create an environment of trust and

confidence-building in which the student is first aware of her disability and, eventually, becomes a self-determined adult.

Interactive read-aloud is one way to converse about disabilities with children. “Texts can provide readers with mirrors to see themselves and windows to look into the lives of others. At the same time, mirrors for some students provide windows for others, which can lead to rich discussions, deeper understandings, and enhanced empathy in classrooms” (Bishop, 1990). Students may see a child who looks and acts like them in the text. Other students may see a protagonist unlike themselves and learn from that experience. Suppose teachers select novels that contain characters with learning disabilities. In that case, it may help students with learning disabilities solve challenging personal and educational problems. The character in the novel can indirectly teach them how to navigate difficult situations. Additionally, teachers can employ these texts to discuss a continuum of abilities to normalize differences and promote equity in marginalized communities (Bishop, 1990).

Chapter 5: Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the content of the interviews with special education teacher, Ms. Jones and general education teacher, Mrs. Horton. Ms. Jones and Mrs. Horton co-teach sixteen general education students and six special education students during a third-period English/language arts course. As a speech-language specialist and special education team member, I collaborated with Ms. Jones and Mrs. Horton regularly. The three of us met before each student's IEP meeting to review the student's current goals to determine if they met them and to create new goals for the upcoming school year. We assembled information from multiple sources, such as narratives from other teachers, personal anecdotes from family members, report cards, progress reports, scores from state-wide assessments, and writing samples from the student. This tedious process required careful consideration to ensure that each student received the services needed to succeed in the classroom. Once we obtained this information, we composed a draft IEP. Ms. Jones and Mrs. Horton created reading and writing goals, and I generated speech and language goals. It was important to join this endeavor because of the overlap between oral and written language skills.

We met with the parents and a principal or assistant principal to discuss the entire draft IEP document as a team. If the student was 14 or older, they were also included in the IEP process. Once the parents agreed to the contents of the IEP and signed for consent, the school team implemented the program immediately.

Often, a student presented with a comorbidity (i.e., more than one disorder), such as a learning disability in the area of reading and/or writing and a communication disorder in the form of an oral language disorder. In this instance, the student had language goals on their IEP addressed

by a speech-language specialist and a special education teacher. An example is as follows: After reading a passage, Carlos will explain the sequence of events to include a beginning, middle, and ending with fading cues in three consecutive opportunities per quarter.

As a speech-language specialist, I would enter Carlos's classroom and teach him strategies to achieve this IEP goal. For example, I may explain the difference between temporal descriptors such as *first*, *next*, *then*, and *last*. Then, I may read a short story aloud and pause to draw a simple picture after each important part of the story. Next, I would rearrange the pictures and ask Carlos to place them sequentially. Finally, I would encourage Carlos to retell the story using the words *first*, *then*, and *last*.

I would weave myself into his routine if I preferred a more discreet approach, in which I did not wish for Carlos to appear as a special education student. Sometimes this is an essential tactic because students wish to blend in with their classmates. In the past, a student expressed to me that he did not wish to be singled out, and I honored his request. In the general education setting, Mrs. Horton may prepare an English lesson and ask the students to complete class assignments. In this instance, I would walk around the classroom and assist all the students. However, whenever I support Carlos at his desk, I would be sure to inconspicuously focus on his individualized language IEP goal because I am cognizant that he needs extra help with sequencing.

Ms. Jones, Carlos's special education teacher, could implement the same IEP goal in written form. For example, she may ask him to write a journal entry about his opinion of the series of events in chapter four of *Mockingbird*, the novel they are reading together as a class. (Ms. Jones could also use this writing sample as evidence for his quarterly progress report or as she is writing his next IEP.) Subsequently, all three instructors collaborate to create and implement a student's IEP goals, as this joint venture results in maximum student learning outcomes.

Discussion of Interviews

My research study's primary question concerns text selection for and by special education students; this was my initial code. After I developed the initial code, I expounded upon the text selection process by highlighting major topics within the transcripts. These major topics became my expanded codes. By narrowing these codes, final codes emerged, which were the methods that Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones employed to decide which texts would enter their classrooms. These final codes became themes, hence why each participant exhibited different themes.

I conducted a thematic analysis and developed themes through in-vivo coding. (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, I analyzed what my participant said. I used the phrasing from her interview to develop three themes for each participant. This method of analysis allowed the codes to emerge organically.

Before developing these themes, I recorded my ideas on a blank, white sheet of paper with a red marker. Then, as I read and re-read the transcripts, I crossed out vague labels for themes and reflected on the interview questions to create descriptive theme names instead. This systematic process was creative and self-reflective in that themes emerged as I ruminated to discover them.

I gathered robust data and developed themes that emerged after analyzing Mrs. Horton's and Ms. Jones's words. This amalgamation of each teacher's verbiage and my analysis resulted in the genesis of the following emergent themes.

Interview #1: Mrs. Horton

Mrs. Horton is a general education English teacher at Hopkins Middle School. Mrs. Horton co-teaches English Language Arts with a special education teacher (Ms. Jones). This team-taught class has sixteen general education students and six special education students. I interviewed Mrs. Horton for approximately 45 minutes to learn more about her processes for selecting instructional

resources for students with disabilities.

After reading the interview transcript multiple times, I developed three central themes for Mrs. Horton: Visceral Ideation, Classroom Curation, and Supplemental Action. Additionally, Mrs. Horton rotates between three novels: *Touching Spirit Bear*, *Mockingbird*, and *Out of the Dust*. I will discuss Mrs. Horton's selected themes and novels in this section.

First, personal connections are important to Mrs. Horton because she believes that emotionally charged novels excite and engage students to read more often. During the interview, she explained this visceral ideation, or the formation of strong feelings and ideas, and the importance of extinguishing taboos to discuss sensitive topics such as incarceration, grief, and displacement. Lewis & Tierney (2013) discussed the "role of emotion in producing and reproducing identities, transforming signs, and constraining and enabling opportunities to learn" (p. 302). Mrs. Horton agreed that emotion could drive a powerful and productive classroom conversation.

In the novel *Touching Spirit Bear*, the protagonist is forced to reflect upon his anger issues during the restorative justice process. Since the main character wishes to avoid incarceration, he participates in the legal practice of alternative dispute resolution instead.

The protagonist in *Mockingbird* is grieving for the loss of her older brother, who was murdered in a school shooting. This is a familiar subject for middle school students because they participate in monthly lockdown drills to prepare and protect themselves from this type of gun violence. The novel *Out of the Dust* refers to displacement and the tragic loss of a family member. Mrs. Horton elaborated:

Mrs. Horton: We read *Out of the Dust*, which is about a little girl growing up in the Dust Bowl and it's written in prose, and there's one scene where she accidentally sets her mother,

her pregnant mother, on fire.

These novels evoke visceral feelings that promote rich classroom discussions. All three novels were approved by a committee consisting of school leaders, teachers, and parents. This committee arose from a collective policy which allows for classroom curation.

Second, Mrs. Horton illustrated her classroom curation process. Each month, students travel as a class to the school library. Students are expected to select a book and write a one-page book report by the end of the month. Mrs. Horton added:

Mrs. Horton: And it's just the idea that there's not enough student choice, and I get that, that like not everyone wants to read the same book, but I just want them reading.

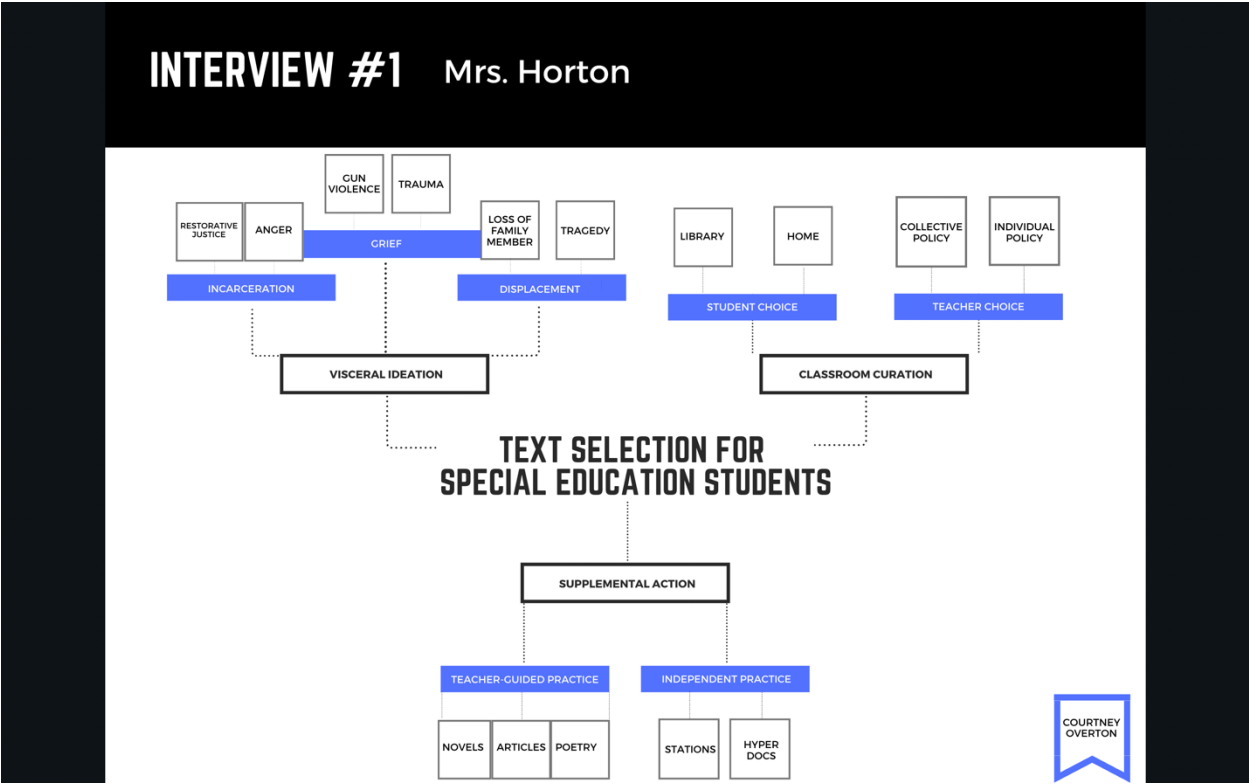
Suppose a student is interested in a specific book that is not available in the school library. In that case, they may procure a book from home with parental permission. Mrs. Horton also has an individual policy in which she selects supplemental resources for her classroom at her discretion.

Third, Mrs. Horton selects passages from other novels, articles, and poetry to supplement and foster comprehension of the background knowledge that is required to understand the content within *Touching Spirit Bear*, *Mockingbird*, and *Out of the Dust*. Mrs. Horton engages in guided reading with these supplemental texts, an instructional approach in which a teacher guides students as they read and provides cues as needed. Mrs. Horton also promotes independent practice with the use of background stations around the classroom and hyperdocs, an electronic document with hyperlinks to accompanying resources, via Google Classroom.

Below, we have a graphical representation of the three themes. For visceral ideation, Mrs. Horton described the different experiences of incarceration, grief, and displacement. She included emotionally charged novels about restorative justice, gun violence, and losing a family member.

For classroom curation, there was a discussion surrounding student choice and teacher choice. Students can sometimes select a book from the library or at home. Other times, the teacher selects the books on a committee or her own. For supplemental action, Mrs. Horton explained the process of selecting novels, articles, and poetry to read as a group to increase students' background knowledge. She also created stations around the classroom where students could read and develop background knowledge independently.

Figure 3: Interview with Mrs. Horton



Interview #2: Ms. Jones

Ms. Jones is a seventh-grade special education English teacher at Hopkins Middle School. I interviewed Ms. Jones for approximately 90 minutes. We engaged in dialogue, in her classroom, about the selection of texts for and by middle school students with disabilities.

Ms. Jones teaches in both team-taught and self-contained settings. Within the team-taught model are general and special education students and teachers. It is sometimes referred to as an inclusion model because it includes multiple types of students and teachers. A self-contained classroom consists of special education students, as well as staff members that are trained in special education pedagogy.

I developed an additional three themes for Ms. Jones: Self-Advocacy is the Ultimate Goal, Classroom Libraries with Manga and Famous Athletes, and Everyone Deserves “Special” Education. First, Ms. Jones strongly supports the notion of self-advocacy in which students are invested in their academic careers. She believes that students must learn to speak up for themselves in difficult situations. In essence, eighth-grade special education students are seemingly forced to learn how to advocate for themselves, as they must attend their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for the first time at this grade level. This is a legal requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Students attend meetings to learn more about their educational goals and their classroom and test accommodations. They also provide input on their long-term and short-term life goals. For example, a student may be interested in learning how to cook over the next year; this is noted in their IEP.

Additionally, students develop career goals at their IEP meetings. For example, they may record, on their IEP, that they want to become a graphic designer when they grow up. This document helps their school counselor to determine appropriate classes for subsequent school

years.

Typically, students feel overwhelmed after they attend their first IEP meeting. However, it is their first step in ownership of their strengths and needs as a student with a disability. Relatedly, Ms. Jones deems students should understand their disability so they can advocate for themselves in spaces where people do not know or understand their needs.

Ms. Jones: And they're going to have to go and be in, and their signature has to be there. And honestly, if we want them to put any effort into their education, they have to be a part of it. So we need their input. They need to be aware of why we're tracking it.

Self-advocacy is the goal, according to Ms. Jones. She elaborated upon the importance of self-advocacy on several occasions throughout the interview. In one instance, she said:

Ms. Jones: So we're building them up. And yeah, these kids, they don't advocate for themselves. So we have to push them harder now, because that real world's going to hit them faster than, I think, the parents realize it. And yeah, they have all this support now, but they need to know, when they're out there, like, 'Okay. I am a struggling reader, so how am I going to do that on my own, out there?'

Ms. Jones described self-advocacy as a learned, self-help skill that children with special needs should learn at an early age. When asked about the materials within her classroom library, Ms. Jones described different types of books, but she also listed several games. Ms. Jones noted that she recently purchased a board game titled *Pay Day* to teach students about the concept of money.

Ms. Jones: I got Payday this year to help them with money. Because they don't understand the concept of money, so they would go to the grocery store and buy milk or something. I don't want them to get cheated out or feel embarrassed that they don't know

how much they need to have out. So that kind of thing.

Even though Ms. Jones is an English teacher, she is still concerned with her students' abilities to understand the value of a dollar. Independence with money, or financial literacy, can be viewed as another form of self-advocacy. Ms. Jones gives credence to the fact that children should be able to advocate for themselves if they do not receive the correct amount of money from a cashier during a transaction at the store.

Second, Manga and famous athletes can be found in Ms. Jones's classroom library. Ms. Jones also believes it is important to build a classroom library that contains books surrounding a variety of genres on multiple reading levels. Many of her students read below grade level and for this reason, they tend to choose graphic novels. For example, in the Manga genre of books, the illustrations are more dominant on the page than the text. This allows students to use visual context clues to understand the plot. Ms. Jones explained:

Ms. Jones: The words are unknown to them, but it's also in, like, another language. So it's like, are they really comprehending? Or are they just comprehending the pictures to make the story? So it's like, are they reading the words, or are they looking at the picture to make the story? So I don't know.

Even though Ms. Jones is unsure, she still relishes in the simple fact that her students are reading and becoming more excited about reading as they become engrossed in these graphic novels.

Ms. Jones also has books about famous athletes in her classroom library because most male students enjoy watching and reading about sporting games. Ms. Jones reported:

Ms. Jones: So they get those, or they'll get a Messi book. A lot of the boys like soccer here, so they try to get a soccer star. Or something about another... My kid just got

something on the... Oh, Muhammad Ali.

As a result, the autobiographies of Messi and Ali are incredibly popular and frequently borrowed from her classroom library.

Third, unfortunately, special education is associated with a stigma. Decades ago, students in special education courses were hidden away from the rest of the school. As a result, these students were not encouraged to socialize with typically-developing peers. Conversely, in modern times, inclusion, or classrooms with special education and general education students, is supported nationwide.

Ms. Jones is confident that all students deserve special education adaptations. In the traditional sense, a student with a disability is the only child requiring special education services.

Ms. Jones, however, does not wholeheartedly agree with this statement. Ms. Jones said:

Ms. Jones: They'll call each other SpEd. And I'm like, 'Guys, we all are. You're using that word,' and I said, 'Honors kids are SpEd.' I said, 'Special Ed. is special education.' I said, 'If you're in the Honors program in school, you're technically considered Special Ed.' So I said, 'You're just throwing that word around, and you're really not even realizing who's under it.'

In the interview, Ms. Jones stated that all students should receive specialized instruction, because each child is special and learns in his/her own way. She added that each child has his/her own set of strengths and needs. Some students may need extra help in math. For example, a student may undergo testing and receive a diagnosis of a learning disability in math. Then, they may be placed in a math class with other students with a similar disability to receive specialized math instruction. Alternatively, a student may seek specialized math instruction in the form of afterschool tutoring to prepare for the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). In the eyes of Ms. Jones,

both of these students are special education students. She articulated:

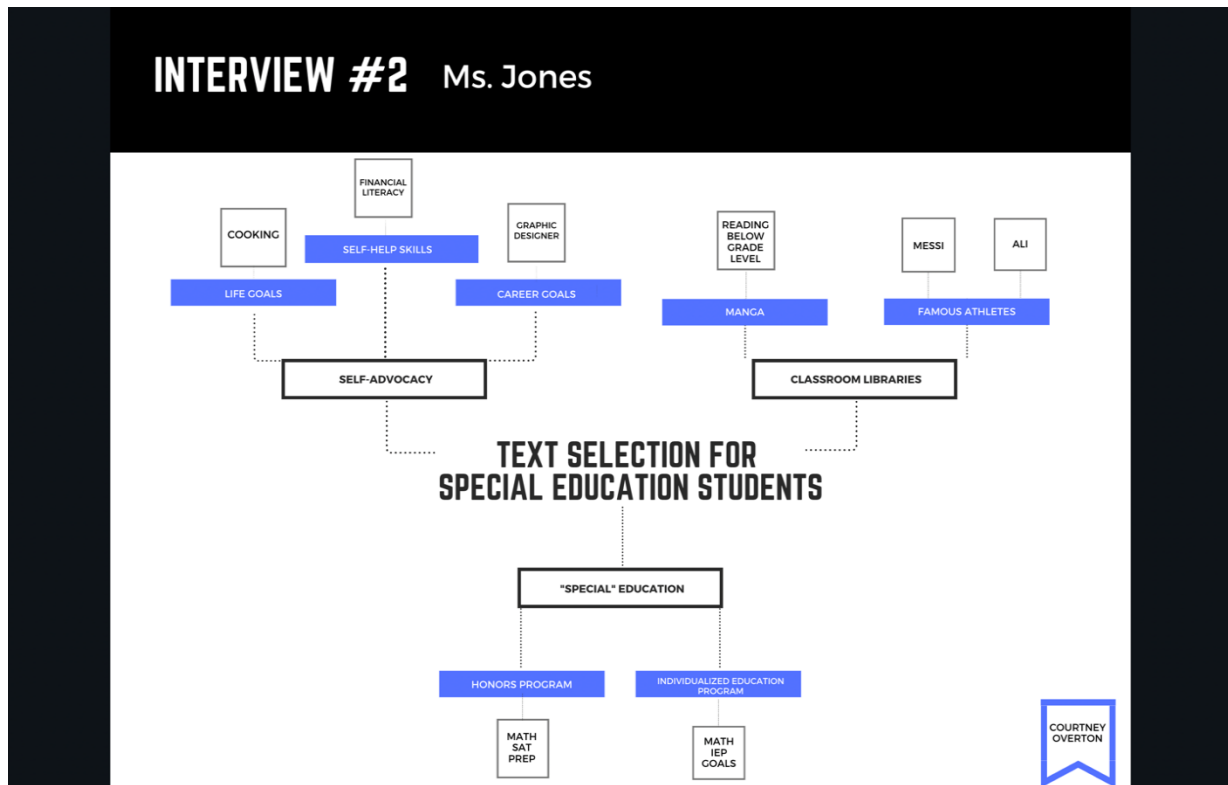
Ms. Jones: [Special Education] doesn't mean at all that you're stupid. Doesn't have nothing to do with that. It just says you need to work in this area. That's why you're in here. You need extra help in this area. That's all an IEP says. 'You're good in this part. You need some extra work here.' That's all that this paperwork is saying.

Ms. Jones is a strong proponent of specialized instruction for all students. In the interview, she intimated that each student, regardless of their intellectual ability, has their own set of strengths and weaknesses, notwithstanding their classification at school. Teachers help students reach their maximum potential through individualized special education.

Figure 4 is a diagrammatical representation of Ms. Jones' interview. Ms. Jones is a fierce proponent of self-advocacy in which students take ownership of their career and life goals and self-help skills. She believes that if a student wants to learn how to cook, it should be on their IEP. If a student wants to be a graphic designer when they grow up, that should also be on their IEP. Ms. Jones also strives to promote financial literacy, another form of self-advocacy, by encouraging students to play games like *Pay Day* so they can practice their money skills in her classroom.

Ms. Jones includes Manga books in her classroom library for students reading below grade level. She also has books about famous athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Lionel Messi, motivating topics for many of her students. Finally, Ms. Jones discussed the notion of “special” education in which students in the honors program and students with IEPs receive individualized instruction, so they can be considered special education students.

Figure 4: Interview with Ms. Jones.



Where are they now?

Initial interviews were conducted in January 2019. Years later, I conducted follow-up interviews (in January 2023) with Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones for approximately 90 minutes each. The follow-up interviews aimed to gather additional information about their post-pandemic lives and see how the current political environment changed their teaching practices.

Approximately one year after the initial interview, the world faced tough decisions as SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) wreaked havoc across the globe. Students and teachers quickly learned how to adapt to a virtual academic environment. With so much uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, many struggled socially and academically/professionally. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 also led to increased mental health concerns. Additionally, educators were charged to

examine their teaching practices related to Critical Race Theory and other similar curricular decisions.

Mrs. Horton

In the Summer of 2021, Mrs. Horton had a baby boy, and she took a leave of absence from her position as a general education teacher at Hopkins Middle School. Mrs. Horton was a stay-at-home mom for one school year, and she returned to the classroom in September 2022 at a different middle school in a new county. After three months, Mrs. Horton decided to leave the profession in December 2022. When I met with her in January 2023, she told me that she was burned out and planned to move her family back to her hometown in Pennsylvania. However, she did not know what was next for her in her career.

Mrs. Horton said goodbye to her teaching career because of the increased and unattainable, responsibilities required of her. She said that, in the end, she did not have any planning time. Because she was a general education teacher in the inclusion setting, she had “a meeting before the meeting, the meeting, and another meeting after the meeting.” Mrs. Horton devoted most of her non-teaching periods to the IEP process. She also recounted additional, overwhelming obligations such as training, gathering data, and meetings with other teachers and administrators (e.g., parent-teacher conferences as well as faculty, department, and IEP meetings). Mrs. Horton said, “There’s no incentives for good teachers. No pay increase. If you’re a good teacher, you’re rewarded with more responsibilities. It’s not sustainable.”

When I asked Mrs. Horton about her administration’s response to George Floyd, she told me that the school district had a robust plan in place before his murder. Mrs. Horton said, “There was an overhaul of books, and teachers looked through the book rooms to see if the books had a diverse set of characters.” She added, they asked themselves, “How are these characters portrayed?”

Is there a white savior?” Mrs. Horton discussed the process of composing rationales for each book and awaiting approval from the literacy committee, comprised of two parents, two teachers, and an administrator. The school donated the unjustified books to economically developing countries.

Mrs. Horton believes an anti-racist lens is essential in this post-George Floyd era. She was appalled with the neighboring school district’s decision to ban Critical Race Theory and young adult literature by Black authors, such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds.

Ms. Jones

In the Summer of 2022, Ms. Jones had a baby girl. She is no longer a special education teacher at Hopkins Middle School. She has switched to a different secondary school in the same school district. Ms. Jones still enjoys her teaching career but reported several post-pandemic challenges. During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, all IEPs were amended to reflect the necessary changes related to COVID-19. For example, over these two school years, students participated in virtual, hybrid, and in-person instruction. IEPs delineate the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for special education students, meaning individuals with IEPs must have as many opportunities as possible to interact with general education students. Educators and administrators conceived new interpretations of the LRE, and many parents were unhappy with the results. Litigious parents are reviewing these IEPs with their attorneys to determine if their children received a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) during the pandemic. (IDEA, 2004)

Ms. Jones’s students were in elementary school during the pandemic. Now they are middle school students with a completely different set of needs. She struggles to contend with this new responsibility of reviewing previous elementary school IEPs for present-day middle school students. Ms. Jones does not dismiss parents that ask her about additional and/or compensatory

special education services such as reading support and speech-language therapy. She understands the parents' concerns.

Ms. Jones has attended to questions from parents such as, "How will you make up for lost skills? How are you going to measure their progress if they never received adequate instruction on their IEP goals in the first place? Is the speech teacher going to make up the speech therapy sessions that they missed?" On the other end of the continuum, Ms. Jones has also received calls and emails from parents of children that do not have IEPs but are seeking additional support after being home with their children during virtual instruction and realizing that they are struggling to complete on-grade-level tasks. In addition, Ms. Jones has students on her caseload who no longer require special education services because they have met their IEP goals, are on grade level, and have demonstrated the ability to advocate for themselves in the academic setting. However, parents are afraid to remove special education support. Parents have reported the need for an IEP to remain in place because there are B and C letter grades on the report card, and they believe they should have all As because they have an IEP. Ms. Jones added, "We're enabling kids and giving them services they don't need. My time should be dedicated to another student that actually needs me. We need to phase these kids out. If you're able to tell me your accommodations off the top of your head, then you don't need an IEP!" For Ms. Jones, this trifecta of cascading parent concerns is all-consuming and leads to emotional overwhelm.

Chapter 6: Reflection

Interpretation

In my research study, I aimed to learn more about the classroom curriculum. This relates to the following question asked by Iyer and Ramachandran (2019), “How can the traditional classroom curriculum be transformed into an ‘active learning’ site where dialogic meaning-making and sense-making help with opening new spaces for learning and generating new knowledge?” (p. 64). I examined the text selection practices of secondary school teachers because I believe careful selection can empower students with learning disabilities. First, the student must be made aware of their disability. Then, they must see their disability reflected in the curriculum. This includes the young adult literature that teachers utilize in their classrooms.

After conducting the study, I learned that middle school English Language Arts teachers can select texts for whole-class instruction. However, they must undergo an approval process, which includes a committee of school administrators, teachers, and parents. Classroom teachers are also permitted to build their library for silent sustained reading (SSR) time, which is scheduled multiple times per week, typically after a student’s lunch period. These teachers can curate their classroom libraries, and children are also granted the autonomy to decide upon texts they would like to read.

Both teachers discussed the importance of building classroom libraries with books that motivate students to read. However, there was little discussion about including books representing the students in the classroom. For example, one committee-approved novel, *Mockingbird*, includes an autistic character. However, among all the books that the educators discussed in their interviews, this was the only book that mentioned a protagonist with a disability.

The study further suggests there is a lack of representation of students with learning disabilities in young adult literature in my context. This is a national social justice issue in the field of education, specifically for students that never see themselves proportionally represented within the literature selected for them by administrators and teachers. (Black & Tsumoto, 2018) My research is important to the field of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education (LCLE) because educators bear responsibility for the narratives within their classrooms and may deeply influence these narratives through representational text selection.

Mirrors, Windows, and Doors

Mirrors, windows, and doors are three different ways to experience representational texts. “As mirrors, books can provide students with reflections of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. As students read about similar characters, they begin to envision connections to the world and its possibilities. As windows, children’s books present places and adventures different from those of readers. Readers can view the realities of new worlds through the characters’ experiences and responses. Finally, books can be seen as doors transporting the reader both into and out of everyday conditions” (Pennell, Wollak, & Koppenhaver, 2017, pp. 412-413). It is important to consider how children with learning disabilities are depicted in such texts (Bishop, 1990).

Recommended representational texts include *Miss Little’s Gift* by Douglas Wood, and *I’m Here* by Peter H. Reynolds. *Miss Little’s Gift* tells the story of a boy with ADHD and dyslexia. Wood composed this autobiography to share his account of his favorite teacher, Miss Little. She taught him how to read and encouraged him to persevere through his learning difficulties. *I’m Here* portrays an autistic student who played alone at school but yearned to develop long-lasting relationships with other children. One day, he built a paper plane, and a girl found it on the

playground, so she returned it to him, and they developed a formidable friendship. Educators of general and special education students can discuss these texts in the classroom to promote equity and inclusion.

If teachers cannot procure or purchase representational books for their students, they may create their own. There is a website called *Tar Heel Reader*, where individuals can compose and illustrate books for free. Also, teachers can apply for grants at *DonorsChoose* and *Dollar General Literacy Foundation*, organizations that require a simple application and provide thousands of dollars to teachers nationwide.

I aim to improve my educational practice by considering mirrors, windows, and doors (Bishop, 1990) in inclusive texts (IT) or books with diverse characters. In the IT framework, educators follow four steps to help readers see themselves. First, I will learn more about my students: their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and routines at home. Second, I plan to examine the texts within my classroom for various purposes, from decodable texts on various reading levels to representational texts portraying diverse characters related to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and ability. Third, I will choose texts that are emblematic of my students and remove (either temporarily or permanently) those books that do not meet my framework. Fourth, I plan to utilize appropriate texts in my pedagogical approach so students may participate in discussions to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging at school (Heineke, Papola-Ellis, & Elliott, 2022).

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

I am also interested in continuing my research study to closely examine text selection practices such as the make-up of the literacy committee at Hopkins Middle School. Perhaps student members, or different types of teachers, could be a welcome addition to the team. Additionally, future research may analyze the committee meeting minutes for language surrounding power and

control. Finally, I am interested in learning more about my research participants' supplementary selection criteria, such as consideration of book awards, real-world issues, and student choice.

During the interview process, Mrs. Horton shared several titles with me, including *Mockingbird*, *Out of the Dust*, and *Touching Spirit Bear*. The first title, *Mockingbird*, operated as her primary choice; she preferred this title above all other novels. This text appeared to “check all of the boxes” for Mrs. Horton because it included an adolescent protagonist with autism (i.e., the right age and the right disability, according to Mrs. Horton). In addition, the instructional use of this title invoked several emotions within the classroom as it also imparted the tale of a school shooting.

Fairclough (1995) explained genre as “a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity” (p. 14). Mrs. Horton decided that the young adult fiction literary genre would be the best fit for her students because it typically includes protagonists with ages and similar experiences.

The school leaders, teachers, and parents' committee approved all three novels. This committee arose from a collective policy which allows for classroom curation. Mrs. Horton feels emboldened because she is on the committee that selects which texts may or may not enter classrooms. It is important to note that the committee consists of school leaders. These leaders establish and enforce school policies and procedures in their day-to-day roles. This power hierarchy between leader and teacher may be a conflict of interest in the text selection process because teachers may not speak their minds during committee meetings due to a possible superiority complex.

Does Mrs. Horton have a false sense of confidence in this process? I would like to dive deeper and audio-record the committee meetings to further analyze the language these educational

arbiters (i.e., teachers, parents, and administrators) use to describe their methods. I am also curious about the effects of adding students to the committee. By including students on the board, team members could listen to students' authentic interests and concerns. What type of character would they like to discuss during their Language Arts classes?

Students are not included in the discussions or the curriculum, so they do not feel included in the classroom, leading to a vicious cycle of disenfranchisement. I consider this to be a barrier to education. It is quite reasonable to speculate that the survivor of a school shooting would not be a secondary student's protagonist of choice.

Among other criteria, Mrs. Horton explained that she considers recipients of book awards as part of her text selection process:

Mrs. Horton: So I was going to say how I select books based on like kind of current events of the time. Just, first popular books, like I look at reviews and see what's current, what's popular. For example -

Mrs. Overton: Like bestsellers?

Mrs. Horton: Bestsellers. Like *Mockingbird* won ... I think it's ... not the Newbery, but Book of the Year award. So, you know, it's a good book. She's a local author so we were able to have her come into the school, which is like another buy-in for students when you get to meet the author.

Choosing a book based on a bestseller list may be considered a controversial choice of action because it can lead to a good vs. bad dichotomy. Furthermore, this text selection process allows the book arbiter to prioritize commerce over inclusivity and representation. The connection between the support of local vendors and texts, which are in the children's best interest, seems attenuated at best. There is greater value in the process when students can select books in which

they see themselves represented in the text. The exclusion of students from the text selection process leads to misrepresentation in curricular materials. Ideally, students would be included in the process and encouraged to share their past experiences, celebrations, and concerns to select a text representative of their lifestyle.

Mrs. Horton also explained her passion for novels with “real-world issues” in several instances during her interview.

Real-world example #1

Mrs. Horton: School shootings are mentioned in the book, which, obviously, is a big issue, especially with last year the Las Vegas shooting happened while we were reading the book they had -

Mrs. Overton: Oh, while you were reading it?

Mrs. Horton: Yeah. So it was like really powerful for ... Like these are real world issues going on. So it's a safe place where the kids can learn about it in like a safe setting [crosstalk 00:01:01] with support and talk about it appropriately.

Real world example #2

Mrs. Horton: This one is ... *Touching Spirit Bear* is a higher level text, lexile-wise, so that's why I do it with Honors. But same thing, it has to do with the idea of the debate of like nature versus nurture. Are you born who you are or do you develop who you are? Every student likes to talk about that and think about that and relate to that. Another thing ... that deals with like violence, family trauma, like there's alcohol, his father's an alcoholic and abusive. So that's another thing. It's like those real world issues, but in a safe place that students can see, "Oh, I'm not alone in this."

Real world example #3

Mrs. Horton: So we've spent quite some time learning about autism, so that, again, they can just understand the characters better in the book, but also like in the real world. They're like, "Oh, people have autism. Oh, there's people in my class that have autism?"

Real world example #4

Mrs. Horton: When I came to [Hopkins], that was a book that they had been using. And so that's actually why I read it and I was like, "Oh, I like this. We can work with this." It has ... the girl breaks things down by word parts. She talks about figurative language. So I just thought it's a good language arts text. But then again, it had those like real world issues of her brother. So Caitlin has autism, she's an 11 year old girl with autism. And her brother's killed in a school shooting. And he was like the one who had always understood her and supported her in making those social connections.

The understanding and interpretation of “real world issues” is subjective; are these issues resonating with students or Mrs. Horton? This text selection process should be reviewed and revised regularly. We all live in different realities with ever-changing perspectives of our shared experiences.

Mrs. Horton described an additional text selection process that she independently employs in her classroom. Each month, students travel as a class to the school library. Students are expected to select a book and write a one-page book report by the end of the month. Mrs. Horton added, “it's just the idea that there's not enough student choice, and I get that, that like not everyone wants to read the same book, but I just want them reading.” If a student is interested in a specific book that

is not available in the school library, then they may procure a book from home with parent permission.

This method vastly differs from the committee's text selection process because it gives power to the students. It also allows for all students, not just special education students, to feel "special" (i.e., everyone deserves "special" education) because they are in control and the adults are listening to what they have to say. We must continue to ask ourselves who has the power in these decisions because those in power will shape the minds of future generations. With a critical literacy lens, I aim to continue to examine the power dynamics of text selection procedures.

Reflection

Conducting this study inspired me to examine my practice of text selection from the perspective of a speech-language specialist. When I worked in the public school district, I was very much struck by the collaboration between myself and the two teachers discussed in this study. This co-teaching model is rare and powerful. In the interviews, each teacher had her ideas about text selection and how they may proceed with that process. Since we were all working within the same classroom, we had discussions. We typically met about once per week to discuss various topics. We considered student hobbies like the different sports depicted within the classroom library. We also thought about our students' reading levels because we wanted to select texts that would be decodable to the readers. However, when Mrs. Horton and Ms. Jones met, they were often more concerned about grade-level texts. They did not have the time and space to necessarily think about a student with dyslexia and choose a text with a protagonist with dyslexia. Instead, teachers would say, "He is reading on a DRA level 38, and we really need to get him to a DRA level 60 by the end of the school year." This ableist mindset is complicated because teachers are motivated to help

their students succeed and take ownership of the educational process. However, they are also driven by external expectations from administrators and parents.

I am no longer a part of the Hopkins Middle School community, as I have transitioned to a clinical professor role at a university. However, careful and thoughtful text selection remains a central tenant of my pedagogy. I hope to make a difference and impact at a larger level by preparing speech-language specialists. I encourage my undergraduate and graduate students to select texts with a critical literacy lens to promote positive outcomes with their students/clients. Recent discussions with university students uncovered fresh outlooks and furthered my understanding of the need to incorporate diverse books in the classroom.

Students should be reflected in the curriculum. When we strive for representational texts, our complex, intricate, multi-dimensional students feel welcome in the classroom, leading to strong relationship building. In turn, teachers and students may experience richer, authentic discussions. “When students see themselves in texts, they are more engaged in reading, comprehend at higher levels, and engage in richer discussions with peers. Texts provide mirrors that validate children’s identities... which serves as a starting place to build positive classroom communities” (Heineke, Papola-Ellis, & Elliott, 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, representational texts promote introspection and self-advocacy as students navigate challenging situations in and out of the classroom (Bishop, 1990).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Relevant Terms

1. 504 (n): a plan to incorporate specific accommodations
2. Accommodation (n): a change in the student's learning environment such as sitting in the front of the classroom
3. A.D.H.D. (n): attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; a medical condition that makes it difficult for an individual to sit still and/or pay attention
4. Advanced academic program (n): specialized instruction for students grades 3-8 that demonstrate the need for academic enrichment
5. Child Study Team (n): a group of faculty and staff members that meets to develop a plan to help a struggling student
6. Classroom management (n): strategies to keep students focused and organized
7. Differentiated instruction (n): provide different types of instruction to different students, depending on their level of ability, interest, content, etc.
8. E.S.O.L. (n): English for Speakers of Other Languages; English instruction for students that speak another language
9. F.A.P.E. (n): free and appropriate public education; the right for all children in the United States to learn grade-level standards
10. Graphic organizer (n): a visual tool to plan and organize thoughts and ideas in preparation for a lengthier writing assignment
11. I.E.P. (n): individualized education program; a legal document that a school must adhere to in order to provide a student with a free and appropriate public education

12. Inclusion (n, adj): include and instruct special education students with general education students
13. K.W.L. (n): know, want to know, learned; a graphic organizer that is completed as a group prior to and after a reading assignment that answers the following questions: What do you already know? What do you want to know? What did you learn?
14. Mainstream (n, v): bring special education students into a general education environment, so they can learn from typically-developing peers
15. Modification (n): a change in the student's curriculum such as writing one paragraph instead of five
16. Native language (n): a child's first language
17. Self-contained (adj): a classroom model composed of six-eight special education students
18. S.P.E.D. (n): special education; specially designed instruction for students with disabilities
19. Sustained silent reading/SSR (n): a school-wide program that promotes recreational reading by instructing students to read silently at a specific time of day
20. Team-taught (adj): a classroom model composed of general and special education teachers and students
21. V.D.O.E. (n): Virginia Department of Education

Appendix B: Consent Form

INDIANA UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR

Advocacy, Representation, and Literacy: Text Selection for Students with Learning Disabilities

You are invited to participate in a research study examining text selection for and by students with learning disabilities. You were selected as a possible subject because you are knowledgeable about the English Standards of Learning for the State of Virginia. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Courtney Overton and Karen Wohlwend, Indiana University, School of Education. This is an unfunded study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers dictate the collection of texts within their classrooms at a middle school in Alexandria, Virginia.

Number of People that Will Participate in this Study

If you agree to participate, you will be one of two teachers that I interview and observe.

Procedures for the Study

If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in the following:

- Participate in a 45-minute interview at your convenience.
- Allow the researcher to observe you teaching for 2 hours at your convenience.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

While taking part in the study, the risks are minimal. When participating in the interviews, you may tell the researcher that you are uncomfortable, or do not care to answer a particular question.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

The possible benefits of participating in this research are positive outcomes within learning environments of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed, if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. I will have access to password-protected video recordings. These recordings will be used for education purposes only, and they will be destroyed in 2025.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP).

PAYMENT

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, contact the researcher, Courtney Overton at cojohn@iu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IU Human Subjects Office at (812) 856-4242 (Bloomington Office) or (800) 696-2949 (National Office).

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Hopkins Middle School.

This research is intended for individual 18 years of age or older. If you are under age 18, do not complete the interview.

This research is for residents of the United States. If you are not a U.S. resident, do not complete the interview.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

In consideration of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

Printed name of the Participant _____

Signature of the Participant _____

Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

Appendix C: IRB Approval December 2018

Protocol Id hide	
Protocol Id:	28645257
Protocol #:	1810695868
Protocol Type:	Exempt
Reference ID1:	
Protocol Status:	Exempt
Title:	Advocacy, Representation, and Literacy: The Effects of Teacher Perception Surrounding Text Selection for Students with Learning Disabilities
Summary/Keywords:	
Initial Submission Date:	10/26/2018
Submission Date:	12/07/2018
Approval Date:	12/07/2018
Expiration Date:	
Last Approval Date:	
Sequence Number:	3
FDA IND or IDE #:	
Reference ID2:	
Special Review Indicator:	Y
Vulnerable Subject Indicator:	
Key Study Person Indicator:	
Funding Source Indicator:	
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Appendix D: IRB Approval August 2022

PROTOCOLS



Overton, Courtney

To: Wohlwend, Karen

Protocol #: 16087

Protocol Title: Advocacy, Representation, and Literacy

Type of Submission: Initial

Level of Review: Exempt

Approval Date: Wednesday, August 17th 2022

Expiration Date: no date provided

**If Expiration Date = "No date provided," this research does not require annual renewal; thus there is no expiration date.*

The Indiana University HRPP approved the above-referenced submission. Conduct of this study is subject to the IU HRPP Policies, as applicable.

Additional Notes:

This research is exempt under the following category:

-Category 2(ii)

Documents approved with this submission:

Attachments

Study Information Sheet IRB Study Information Sheet #16087.docx

Recruitment Materials IRB Verbal Script.docx

Data Collection Instrument IRB Interview Questions.docx

You should retain a copy of this letter and all associated approved study documents in your research records.

If you have any questions or require further information, please contact the HRPP via email at irb@iu.edu or via phone at (317) 274-8289.

Protocol #1810695868 was approved on 12/07/2018 and it is an Exempt protocol. Exempt protocols approved prior to 01/01/2020 were not migrated into the new system. I was advised to resubmit a new protocol in the new system. Protocol #16087 was approved on 08/17/2022.

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

1. What motivated you to become a teacher?
2. What type of non-academic support do you provide to your students?
3. Tell me about a recent encounter with a child with a learning disability.
4. What was that encounter like for you? How did you feel?
5. What is your biggest challenge when working with children with disabilities?
6. What is the greatest reward you receive when working with children with disabilities?
7. What are your thoughts and opinions about students with disabilities reading about other students with disabilities in educational resources?
8. Tell me about a recent encounter with a neurotypical child and a book about a child with disabilities.
9. What was that encounter like for you? How did you feel?
10. Can you describe your experience in researching and obtaining instructional materials for your students?
11. What are your criteria for book selection for your classroom?
12. What types of characters (religion, race, gender, abilities/disabilities, etc.) do you look for when you select instructional materials?
13. How much autonomy do you have in the selection of educational media to instruct your students?
14. How do your students influence your curriculum or lesson planning?
15. Are students encouraged to select a certain type of book for assignments? If so, how?
16. What is the school's formal administrative procurement process for selecting instructional materials for the classroom?

17. After selection, are you required to receive additional administrative approval of books and other media before incorporating them into instruction?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Appendix F: Additional Interview Questions

These questions naturally occurred during the interview and were not included in the initial interview protocol.

1. Who's on the book selection committee?
2. How many books do you usually select per school year?
3. Do you use Google Classroom every day?
4. Do you usually read the books on your own, and then you read it to the class aloud?
Or do they read it independently?

Appendix G: Interview #1: Mrs. Horton

Mrs. Horton So I was going to say how I select books based on like kind of current events of the time. Just, first popular books, like I look at reviews and see what's current, what's popular. For example -

Mrs. Overton Like bestsellers?

Mrs. Horton Bestsellers. Like *Mockingbird* won ... I think it's ... not the Newbery, but Book of the Year award. So, you know, it's a good book. She's a local author so we were able to have her come into the school, which is like another buy in for students when you get to meet the author.

Mrs. Overton Right. local celebrity.

Mrs. Horton Right. And then the topics in it, autism, is very prevalent. So I think that's important. School shootings are mentioned in the book, which, obviously, is a big issue, especially with the Las Vegas shooting happened while we were reading the book they had -

Mrs. Overton Oh, while you were reading it?

Mrs. Horton Yeah. So it was like really powerful for ... Like these are real world issues going on.

So it's a safe place where the kids can learn about it in like a safe setting with support and

talk about it appropriately.

Mrs. Overton So are all of the seventh grade English teachers doing that book?

Mrs. Horton Most of them at the team-taught level and the level choose *Mockingbird* because I think it's a sixth-grade reading level, so it's accessible for the kids who are maybe not on grade level, but it's still not like a fourth grade text. And the girl, the main character, is about their age. So that's another thing. I try to pick a book that has a protagonist that they can somewhat relate to, all of them, even if it's just the age of it. For example, what I do with Honors is *Touching Spirit Bear*, and it's about a boy who's in the middle school setting.

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay.

Mrs. Horton This one is ... *Touching Spirit Bear* is a higher-level text, Lexile-wise, so that's why I do it with Honors. But same thing, it has to do with the idea of the debate of like nature versus nurture. Are you born who you are, or do you develop who you are? Every student likes to talk about that and think about that and relate to that. Another thing ... that deals with like violence, family trauma, like there's alcohol, his father's an alcoholic and abusive. So that's another thing. It's like those real-world issues, but in a safe place that students can see, "Oh, I'm not alone in this."

Mrs. Overton So do you ever get pushback from parents like, "I don't want my kid reading about this."

Mrs. Horton I never have, no.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Because I have heard that before.

Mrs. Horton I think with some texts that can happen, like for example, *Mockingbird* mentions *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I would not feel comfortable teaching that at this level.

Mrs. Overton Yeah.

Mrs. Horton If I was a high school teacher, possibly. But like that's ... I just really try to be like, "What is acceptable?" Like I think it's important that it's slightly ... not ... like a little like provocative, I guess.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, you don't want it to be dull.

Mrs. Horton Like I want the kids to buy into it and be like, "Oh, wow, we're talking about things that matter and we are curious about, but we feel like we can't talk about them because they're so taboo."

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton So that's kind of how I pick books usually.

Mrs. Overton So you usually read it like on your own and then you read it to them? Or do they read it independently?

Mrs. Horton I switch it up. With team-taught we do a lot of the reading in class together because they just understand it so much more when we can do guided reading and stop and ask questions, and, "Hey, I need you to tell me one thing you remember or one thing you're confused by." That sort of thing. Honors, they do more reading on their own. Like they'll sometimes take the book home and read some chapters. And I still do, like when they come back I would do just like comprehension quick check-ins like, "What happened to Cole?" You know, "What was the weapon he used in that attack?"

Mrs. Overton With the details?

Mrs. Horton Yeah, like basic comprehension, making sure they got it. And then we go into those more like discussion questions.

Mrs. Overton Okay. So is there a specific criteria that the English department has to follow in terms of the middle school English department, not necessarily across the county, but here at Hopkins?

Mrs. Horton There is a book approval list.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton So that's how *Mockingbird* has been approved. Like that's cause we've used it before. So that one has been approved.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Yeah, I remembered that one from last year.

Mrs. Horton Yeah. So that's what ... We kind of agree like, "Are we going to keep the books this year? Do we want to try new books?" And if we want to try new books, we just have to do that book approval.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton Which two teachers have to review it and then two parents, and then it's sent to a committee and they read the reviews and then -

Mrs. Overton And who's on the committee?

Mrs. Horton There's some teachers. I feel like -

Mrs. Overton Here?

Mrs. Horton Yes, I know Ashley Riley used to be one, and then I believe an

administrator as well has to then sign off on it.

Mrs. Overton Okay. So it's kind of a lengthy process.

Mrs. Horton It is. And that's ... Unfortunately, we lost the book approval list.

Mrs. Overton Really?

Mrs. Horton So we had to like read ... like it just went missing.

Mrs. Overton This year?

Mrs. Horton Last year. So that's ... At the end of last year, we were scrambling like, "Oh, my gosh, what are we going to read? Let's at least get the very few that we know we're going to teach approved."

Mrs. Overton So how many do you usually select per school year?

Mrs. Horton To be honest, we probably end up reading one full novel a year.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Yeah.

Mrs. Horton Which I would like to do more, but it just, especially when you're ...

Mrs. Overton There's so much going on.

Mrs. Horton There's so much to do!

Mrs. Overton Yeah, I remember when I was in middle school reading *The Giver* in eighth grade, and I don't remember reading anything else.

Mrs. Horton We do like a lot of like supplemental activities to go with it like articles and poetry. So, I try to do as much paired text to also make connections, make it more interesting as well.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton And we also do those like building background stations. Excuse me. A lot of times beforehand we'll like build background knowledge for the novel. So like before we read *Thank You Ma'am* by Langston Hughes.

Mrs. Overton Oh, yeah, I remember that.

Mrs. Horton We read that article about Langston Hughes. We did a little hyper doc on Harlem and things like that. So for *Mockingbird* -

Mrs. Overton And I remember you showed, was it a painting or a drawing? And you had a discussion about the lights -

Mrs. Horton Yeah, the migration movement. I was like, "Well, why was everyone up in Harlem? You know, how was this Harlem Renaissance started?" Just so that they can, while they're reading, again, it adds to that deeper comprehension. And like *Mockingbird*, the girl has autism. So we've spent quite some time learning about autism, so that, again, they can just understand the characters better in the book, but also like in the real world. They're like, "Oh, people have autism. Oh, there's people in my class that have autism?"

Mrs. Overton Yeah. They were like, "What? I mean, she speaks so fluently."

Mrs. Horton Right.

Mrs. Overton I forget his name ... Shane? Yeah, he said that. I was like, "Yes, she does."

Mrs. Horton And that's why we did -

Mrs. Overton It blew his mind.

Mrs. Horton Right. Cause there were other videos where the little girl was not verbal.

Mrs. Overton Oh, I didn't see that one.

Mrs. Horton So it's like they can see like the vast difference. And that's why we talk about it's a spectrum.

Mrs. Overton So you use Google basically every day.

Mrs. Horton Not every day, but a good amount. Yeah. I really like Google Classroom. I think it's just like accessible. It's easy for me to use. It's like easy to get the kids in there ...

Mrs. Overton Automatically saves!

Mrs. Horton Yeah, and Google Drive is already hooked up to it, if that makes sense.

Mrs. Overton So let me see what other questions I have. Do you feel like there's admin pushback ever in book selection?

Mrs. Horton Not here.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton But also I think we've ... Like this department, the English department, does a pretty good job of not pushing it.

Mrs. Overton Yeah.

Mrs. Horton We've ... Again, these are serious texts. They have serious issues, but we're not trying to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. So, for the most part, our principal has been really supportive of ... Like *Ghost* is the new one we're trying to get approved into the curriculum, by Jason Reynolds, because it's a popular new text, the students really like, apparently, his series and him as a writer.

Mrs. Overton That's it up there?

Mrs. Horton Yeah. *Ghost*. It's by Jason Reynolds. It's like about like a boy from a struggling family. He joins the track team. And the kids just like it. He writes like the way ... like in dialect. So I think they think that's like kind of cool that it's not like that strict old school standard English language, like more that they're like, "Oh, okay."

Mrs. Overton So they can understand it a little better.

Mrs. Horton Yeah. So that's what our principal was pretty good about. "Yeah. Go ahead. Do you want to order some books? Just get it approved and we'll order some!"

Mrs. Overton Okay. That's good.

Mrs. Overton You mentioned two of the books like *Mockingbird*, and what's *The Spirit Bear*?

Mrs. Horton This is *Touching Spirit Bear*.

Mrs. Overton So you said that *Mockingbird* had a kid with autism in the book? So do you remember why that was selected? Was it because he had autism or was it because of the style of writing? Was there a specific reasoning behind that?

Mrs. Horton I'm actually not sure. When I came to Hopkins, that was a book that they had been using. And so that's actually why I read it and I was like, "Oh, I like this. We can work with this." It has ... the girl breaks things down by word parts. She talks about figurative language. So I just thought it's a good language arts text. But then again, it had those like real world issues of her brother. So Caitlin has autism, she's an 11 year old girl with autism. And her brother's killed in a school shooting. And he was like the one who had always understood her and supported her making those social connections.

Mrs. Overton Was she at the school when he got shot?

Mrs. Horton No.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton But she was at the hospital after, and there's this whole thing about the symbolism of this chest that they're building.

Mrs. Overton Oh, yeah, I remember that.

Mrs. Horton Right. Cause it was like his unfinished Boy Scout project. He was like building a chest. But also it's the symbolism of like his chest was blown open, and in parts and talks about like the cavernous feel of the chest and how it's empty, and it's allows for that symbolism of, "Is she talking about the chest or is she talking about that flashback to seeing Devin in the hospital?"

Mrs. Overton Right. Cool. I didn't realize that.

Mrs. Horton It's heavy, but we do it ... It's a safe space. The one year though, we read *Mockingbird* and then we read *Out of the Dust*, which is about a little girl growing up in the Dust Bowl, and it's written in prose, and there's one scene where she accidentally sets her mother, her pregnant mother, on fire. So the students -

Mrs. Overton They didn't like that.

Mrs. Horton They were like ... To have both those texts was too heavy.

Mrs. Overton Okay, so ...

Mrs. Horton Like it was too much to have like both mothers being lost -

Mrs. Overton Tragedy.

Mrs. Horton And the heavy, heavy tragedies. So that's why, this year, I don't plan to teach *Out of the Dust* in entirety. I may pull excerpts, but ...

Mrs. Overton Okay. So what are some of the major themes in *Spirit Bear*? This one is really, learning to value life, like your own life as well as others. So does that have anything to do with Native American culture?

Mrs. Horton It does.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Cause that's what I immediately think of when I see the cover art, even the title.

Mrs. Horton And that's what it has to do with. So this boy beats up another boy, and he has all these anger issues and he basically is going to get sent to juvie, but instead he's allowed to be sent to Alaska and do Circle Justice, it's called.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton It's like restorative justice, which we follow in our school district.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton So, again, they like learn about restorative justice -

Mrs. Overton Making that connection.

Mrs. Horton And making those connections of, "These things are real. Like these are our options, this is what we use in our school system."

Mrs. Horton They learn about the Tlingit Native American culture and their beliefs about respecting nature and each other. So ... But that's what ... The boy's father is really like the antagonist, I guess you would say, of the story cause he is an alcoholic, he's abusive, and that's ... Cole, the main character. Is he naturally like an aggressive child and making all these bad decisions?

Mrs. Overton Or was he made to be that way?

Mrs. Horton Right. Or is it like a learned process because his father never got the help that he needed? And the idea of like a circle and the idea of like things continuing if -

Mrs. Overton There's no right answer, really. Okay.

Mrs. Overton Are there any Native American students that you're aware of?

Mrs. Horton I do have one Native American student, but she's not in my Honors class, so

I

don't...

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay. She's not reading this.

Mrs. Horton Yeah, she's not reading this one. But that's ... I just try to pick, again, like different cultures, as well, and just books from around the world. Like this man, Ben Mikaelson is actually South American.

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay.

Mrs. Horton He's just really neat. He's like a quirky guy, and so they get to read his biography and see again how he was kind of like ... never really fit in. He was like, "I don't care. Life is what you make it. I'm going to be me." And he was like a struggling writer growing up as well, and he talks about that in his biography. So that's another thing. All the kids that think they're not good writers are like, "Wow, I can be a writer if I work hard and just have that creativity in me."

Mrs. Overton Keep practicing.

Mrs. Horton And so, I don't know, I just think they're both valuable.

Mrs. Overton Good. Let's see what else I have here.

Mrs. Overton So what about in terms of the other books, like the one pager type book reports where they're able to select it on their own?

Mrs. Horton So that one I got from...

Mrs. Overton What's the criteria for that?

Mrs. Horton So I got that idea from Kelly Gallagher, has a book *Readicide*.

Mrs. Overton Oh, yeah, you showed me.

Mrs. Horton Okay. And it's just the idea that there's not enough student choice, and I get that, that like not everyone wants to read the same book, but I just want them reading.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton So there's that expectation of, "If it's in our library, it's approved, they're allowed to read it." And then if they want to read a book that's not here, they have to have their

parent say it's okay for them to read it.

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay.

Mrs. Horton Because I've had a couple students -

Mrs. Overton So they would send you an email saying -

Mrs. Horton Yeah. Or like they bring in the book and they're like ... they show it to me and they're like, "I'm reading this." And that's ... Most of the time they're always appropriate. There was one time that I was like, "Oh, this is a little iffy." And the Dad was like, "No, I said she can read that book."

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay.

Mrs. Horton And I was like, "All right, as long as that's fine with you." And I just make sure whatever they present to the class is appropriate.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton Cause I did have a student, they read *The Hate U Give*.

Mrs. Overton Oh, yeah.

Mrs. Horton And I guess it says the f-word in the book and she had quoted that and put it on her one pager. So I was just like, "Please censor -"

Mrs. Overton Any other quote, maybe?!

Mrs. Horton Yeah, you know, like even like if that is the most important quote, you need to block out ... like just literally take a permanent marker and censor it like you would to make it a clean version.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton And that's only ever happened in and Honor's setting.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton And, for the most part, everybody's been really mature about it. Like it was literally projected for a couple seconds, and no one said anything.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Surprising!

Mrs. Horton So I was like, "All right, great!"

Mrs. Overton Mature!

Mrs. Horton Yeah, I was pretty surprised. But I was just like, "I understand it's in the book, you have parent permission to read it, that's great. I'm glad you made connections. Please, just censor it."

Mrs. Overton Yeah. I heard that movie is good.

Mrs. Horton Yeah.

Mrs. Overton I didn't get to see it.

Mrs. Horton I haven't seen it yet either.

Mrs. Overton So you basically tell them to do whatever you want, and do they do that pretty often? Cause I know they go to the library like once or twice a month. So are they doing the one pager basically every month?

Mrs. Horton Yes, for the most part. It's like a month-long reading assignment.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton And that's what ... Some kids finish it early and then I say, "That's fine, just

hang on to your assignment. Pick a new book and just keep reading." And I do challenge them to try and step out of their comfort zones. Like, you know, some kids always pick the same genre.

Mrs. Overton Like Manga?

Mrs. Horton Right. And that's another thing with ... I'm fine with graphic novels, but if they read it one month, and then next month I'm like, "Okay, pick a novel, not a graphic novel." Just because I find ... I know the value of graphic novels, but I do want them to realize they can enjoy other books that don't have the pictures to go along with it.

Mrs. Overton So do you think it's important for, like you said, with the *Mockingbird* book with autism, do you think that students with autism in your classroom really identify with that or do you feel like they don't even know that they have autism?

Mrs. Horton Most of the time they don't even know.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, that's what I find too. Because we're always like, "Oh, self-advocacy!" Like that's a really big IEP goal at the middle school level, because from K through sixth, nobody has told them that they have a disability.

Mrs. Horton Right.

Mrs. Overton So they're in these different types of classes now at the middle school level,

like self-contained, team-taught, you know, they're starting to realize all of these differences. So they write goals on the IEP that say, "So and so will self-advocate in class" like raise their hand, but they're not really writing self-advocacy goals about identifying their disability." And I think that that's a tragedy. I don't think ... I mean, just thinking of it from a cultural standpoint, like if I was from Italy, I would want to know more about my Italian heritage. I want to know more about that and learn about it so I can see what my history is. Because you're going to, you know, bring that into your present life. And kids that have autism, they're starting to realize that they're different, but nobody's telling them why and nobody's saying, "Oh, why do I pace around the classroom?" Or, "Why is it hard for me to make friends?"

Mrs. Horton And I definitely agree with what you're saying. I think it comes down to, a lot of times, it's -

Mrs. Overton The parents.

Mrs. Horton The parents aren't -

Mrs. Overton They're not ready.

Mrs. Horton They're not ready to let their child realize they're different, which that's why we focus so heavily on autism. And that's what I love the TED talks because the one girl is like, "Why are you trying to be normal?" You know?

Mrs. Overton "You don't have to do this."

Mrs. Horton "You don't have to be ordinary; you can be extraordinary." And like that's -

Mrs. Overton What's that one called? Do you know?

Mrs. Horton That one was Rosie King, and she's the one, she has autism, and she was giving the speech in front of us.

Mrs. Overton So that was the one Shane was talking about?

Mrs. Horton Yes. Yeah.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Mrs. Horton And so that's what they can see. Like, "Wow, look at how successful she's become." And, again, like that difference between what Rosie King can do. She's verbal. She's giving a presentation in front of an audience.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, very verbal.

Mrs. Horton And then there's Iris Rose, who is nonverbal, but she can paint a masterpiece that's being compared to Monet or Van Gogh.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Mrs. Horton That's what ... I agree with you that I think if -

Mrs. Overton Yeah, I mean I was in Ms. Jones's self-contained class last year and there were maybe eight kids and probably like three or four of them have autism and none of them even knew. It's like, "Hm... You don't see the similarities here?"

Mrs. Horton Right.

Mrs. Overton And they don't because they've never heard any of these terms before. They don't even ... I mean, it's just like saying like, "Oh, I have ADHD." It's a term that people have heard but they don't know that they have it.

Mrs. Horton Right. And it's like that's just how like you or I know our strengths and weaknesses. It helps us because then, "Okay, so this is my weakness. How can I compensate for it?" And they're not getting, so ...

Mrs. Overton Yeah.

Mrs. Horton It just comes down to like confidentiality and parents, though, because, obviously, I can't be the one to be like, "Oh, you didn't know you have autism?"

Mrs. Overton I wish I could! But that's crossing the line in the parent's eyes because that's a personal conversation that the two of them should have.

Mrs. Horton Right. Yeah. But when?

Mrs. Overton Exactly. It should have been as soon as you got the diagn ...

Mrs. Horton A year ago.

Mrs. Overton Maybe they got it at like age three, so maybe not that early, but as soon as they're in school, I think. I think you can start talking about it at like five years old.

Mrs. Horton I agree.

Mrs. Overton On their level, obviously.

Mrs. Horton Yeah. And that's what I've always ... Like that's why I like to talk about real issues here cause it's like, "Why are we avoiding these things? Why are we acting like they don't exist? Like why can't we just not make it a taboo by openly talking about it?"

Mrs. Overton Yeah. So I think that's great. And I think that they should be reading books that they can see themselves in.

Mrs. Horton I agree.

Mrs. Overton I think that's it.

Mrs. Horton Oh, good. Okay.

Mrs. Overton Yeah. Thank you!

Appendix H: Interview #2: Ms. Jones

Mrs. Overton So what motivated you to become a teacher?

Ms. Jones Actually, I didn't want to become a teacher at all.

Mrs. Overton You were a psych major, right?

Ms. Jones Yeah. So when I was younger, I always wanted to work with individuals with disabilities. I worked a lot with students with Down syndrome, and I did a lot of camps when I was younger in high school, and I just had a knack for helping students achieve, or individuals achieve something that they weren't able to do. Or people looking at them different, that drove me crazy, because I always saw them as an individual, so just, like, spreading awareness. People are individuals first, before their disability. So that just kind of stuck with me.

Ms. Jones So I went and did psychology because I was interested in behaviors. So I studied strictly behaviors, and more towards autism in college, and then I got my master's in special ed.

Mrs. Overton Wow!

Ms. Jones I didn't want to become a teacher. I was like, "I'm never going to go into a public school system." And eight years later, here I am.

Mrs. Overton Still here.

Ms. Jones Still here.

Mrs. Overton So what type of non-academic support do you provide to your students, because I know that you have a really good rapport with them, and they come to you, and you feed them. So tell me more about that.

Ms. Jones So... clothing. So I have clothes under my desk for students that need them. Jackets, food, some students, you kind of know that when they keep asking, or the ones that ask quietly for food, they actually need the food.

Mrs. Overton Because they're embarrassed to say.

Ms. Jones Yeah, they actually do need it. One of the students, I actually just took his sweatshirt home, because he said, and I quote, "Your boy smells, Miss." And I was like, "Who's my boy?" And he was like, "I do." So I took his sweatshirt home and washed it. And the fact that-

Mrs. Overton What did it smell like?

Ms. Jones I think it was just sweat.

Mrs. Overton Just body odor?

Ms. Jones Yeah. Because he wears it every day. Like, that's his jacket. He doesn't have a winter jacket. So we got him a winter jacket.

But I took his hoodie home and just washed it. And the fact that he just had a clean hoodie the next day, his face was just, like, lit up, and just like, it was clean. And he was like, "No, I don't want to make you do," and I was like, "No, I launder anyways." Washed that hoodie by itself, because it was a little bit dirty.

Mrs. Overton I was going to ask you, did you mix it with your own clothes?

Ms. Jones I washed it twice. No, I washed it twice, by itself, with a lot of soap. But it was just like that kind of stuff because that... I don't know. I feel like if they're in clean clothes, they're going to want to be here, and they feel better about themselves.

Mrs. Overton They know people aren't talking about them behind their back about how they smell.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And how I gave it back to him, I like, "Dude, you left this in my classroom." He's like, "No, I didn't." I'm like, "Yes, you did."

Mrs. Overton Wink, wink.

Ms. Jones I know. And I'm like, "Dude, you've got to pick up what I'm throwing down at you." No, just like making them feel like they are part of something. Acknowledging them when they are here. Like, one kid, his brother is sick, very sick, and in the hospital. So he misses a lot. So just acknowledging when he's here. Like, "Hey, it's really good to see you."

Mrs. Overton That's so important, that they feel like, I want you to be here.

Ms. Jones So he left here, I had him already. And I'm like, "Hey, I'm looking forward to seeing you on Monday." And he's like, "Maybe." And I was like, "I'll see you Monday." Because him getting to school is really a struggle. So just encouraging, like when I see them. Anytime I see them in the hallway it's like, "Hey, good to see you," so they know it's like, I notice you. Thank you for coming to school.

Mrs. Overton How do you feel interacting with kids with disabilities? Obviously, you're a special education teacher, so you do it every day. But can you talk more about the progression from your first interaction to what it's like now?

Ms. Jones Like, my very first year teaching? Or like when I first met them?

Mrs. Overton Just, like, period. Just interacting with somebody with a learning disability, or a physical disability, and how you, I'm assuming, became more comfortable interacting with people with disabilities.

Ms. Jones Yeah. So I mean, I hate to say it, but obviously, with like more of a physical disability, you kind of, I don't want to say you-

Mrs. Overton It's more obvious.

Ms. Jones -it's more obvious, and you always want to be... Like, I'm always more aware of what is the nature of it. I don't want to hurt, obviously, somebody. So someone, if they're wheelchair bound, I want to make sure, if I'm working especially with them, do I know how to properly lift them. Or like, I want to make sure I feel safe so I'm never hurting the child if I have to do anything with that type of nature. But then, like, we have kids this year that are blind in an eye, and it's...

Mrs. Overton Oh, yeah. You told me about that one.

Ms. Jones Yeah, but it's so normal. I'm just like, "Oh, okay." And with my niece having all those medical needs, it's just... And I'm like, nobody's perfect. Everybody has some type of-

Mrs. Overton Weakness?

Ms. Jones -weakness, and it's just like, whatever it looks like on you. Some of it you can tell. Some of it you can't tell. And working with the kids with learning disabilities... and that's

why I think when people say, "Oh, you're a Sped teacher," they automatically think we work with kids with intellectual disabilities or physical disabilities. And I'm just like, "You wouldn't even be able to pick my kids out." Like, they're the regular teenagers. They're making inappropriate jokes. They're fooling around in the hallway. They're the everyday kid that you see.

Mrs. Overton Caring about their Nike checks on their shoes.

Ms. Jones Yeah, right? Like, the girls asking them out. Like, who their best friend is at lunch. Like, they're the average kid. But then, you do see the differences when the work comes. Like, the pushback, or the, "I'm tired. I don't want to do this. Can I get water?" That's when you see the big differences.

Mrs. Overton That avoidance behavior?

Ms. Jones But the social interactions, this year especially, they're all really good friends, this group of kids. So there's really no, like, huge divide between the special ed. kids. Some years you can tell these kids have been separated from each other. They stuck together, but this year, they're, like-

Mrs. Overton They're tight?

Ms. Jones - disability kids, yeah. They're all just like one big happy family, which is kind of nice to see that they've been blended.

Mrs. Overton Can you talk more about your classroom library, and how you curated that?

Ms. Jones Oh, so you see my crates?

Mrs. Overton Yes.

Ms. Jones So yeah, my dad helped me with that, so that was fun. My classroom library, so that's like a spot that they can feel welcome to relax and just read.

Mrs. Overton There's a lot of motivational quotes, too.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And there're books that are on their level. There're books that are challenging. There're books that are faces that they should recognize. That, “Who is?” collection. The “Who is Malala?” “Who is” um.

Mrs. Overton Maya Angelou.

Ms. Jones Maya Angelou, yeah. They're people that we do talk about in the curriculum, so that's why those books were there, as well. Frida, we talked about her at the beginning of the year, and we did actually look at that book. Some of those books they read during their fifth period for the silent sustained reading.

Mrs. Overton Oh, right.

Ms. Jones But they like to sit back there and read. And honestly, when they are back there, they do use it and read. There are books like the Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Now, I do encourage them to go up if they can, if I think the Diary is... Some of the kids-

Mrs. Overton Because those are for fifth-grade level?

Ms. Jones -fourth, fifth grade. Some of the kids, that is appropriate in the self-contained. I don't really recommend them for team-taught because they should be higher than that. But self-contained, some of them are appropriate. And also, it's like a good confidence booster, that they can read a book. And it's like, "Hey, I read a whole book," right? There's all different kind of, there's like non-fiction, fiction. There's sports back there. So there should be something for everybody. And then there's games that we use. The games back there I do for... the Apples to Apples, that builds vocabulary. So I really like that.

Mrs. Overton I love that game for speech therapy!

Ms. Jones And that's also a good community builder. We did that towards the beginning of the year, just so everyone is taking turns. And it's like, let's be kind to each other. I do like the junior one. The red boxes are harder. The words are a lot more challenging for the kids. I think they're just more challenging words.

Mrs. Overton Scrabble.

Ms. Jones And Payday. I got Payday this year to help them with money.

Mrs. Overton Oh. Okay.

Ms. Jones Because they don't understand the concept of money, so they would go to the grocery store and buy milk or something. I don't want them to get cheated out or feel embarrassed that they don't know how much they need to have out. So that kind of thing. But I think it's good that they also can be kids. When they take their breaks, they have 5-10 minutes, depending on our day, and they interact with each other. So it's a little bit of everything back there.

Mrs. Overton Cool. So you basically have autonomy of what you can put in your own classroom library?

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton What about when you're picking something for your actual lessons?

Ms. Jones So that has to be approved by the school.

Mrs. Overton Okay. Yeah. Mrs. Horton told me about that.

Ms. Jones Right.

Mrs. Overton There's a committee and they go-

Ms. Jones Yeah. So it has to be two teachers that read it, two parents, and then the administrator has to overall approve it. And ours is Mrs. Stanford (assistant principal) because she's the head of the English department. So like, I did *House Arrest*, and I got that approved. So that book wasn't approved a couple of years ago. So I got that approved.

Mrs. Overton Okay. What's that about?

Ms. Jones *House Arrest*? So it's about a boy whose brother was born with some breathing difficulties, and he has a trach put in. The brother gets put on house arrest because he stole this guy's wallet at the store to buy medicine for his sick brother, because Dad up and left. So it really hits home to a lot of our kids' family situations, like how they come from broken homes, or they're like, "Oh, yeah, we don't always have..."

And then, there's food being dropped off at their house randomly. And he has a good friend across the street. And it's not always like, just because he did something wrong, he's a bad human. He did something wrong to help for a good cause. It's just the consequence of what he did. And it's, like, that whole lesson that we can talk about.

Mrs. Overton Is he middle school age?

Ms. Jones He's in seventh grade. Yeah. And the book is written in verse, so it's a shorter

read. And I do it in self-contained. We're actually doing it at team-taught, and they actually really like the story, and it's very current. Like, the names are appropriate. They're current names. They're not like your Bob and Sally names. Timothy and Jose are the characters. Jose's his best friend who lives across the street.

Mrs. Overton Which is especially good for this population because there's so many Spanish- speaking kids.

Ms. Jones And actually, they can really relate to it and the fact that he is in seventh grade. They're in seventh grade. The brother is sick. They know that he has different needs, that he has to do it. Now, Timothy has to step up and become like an adult as a middle schooler. And some of these kids are in those same situations. They can really connect to that. So that's why we actually chose that book. And the fact that it was written in verse, it was a little bit lighter to start with the self-contained.

Mrs. Overton Yeah. Easier to get through.

Ms. Jones And the style is frustrating for them.

Mrs. Overton So you're doing *House Arrest*. Are you doing any other books as a whole class this school year in self-contained?

Ms. Jones Self-contained, I'm not sure if we're going to do... They're going to pick an international person for their next quarter, and that's what they're going to focus on next. So they're going to be focusing on doing research on a specific person that did something influential. So we want them to branch out.

Mrs. Overton That's not from America?

Ms. Jones Right. We want them to branch out of the United States. That's ours, Ms. Abdul (English teacher) and I, specifically.

Mrs. Overton What about team-taught? Which book are you doing as a class for team-taught?

Ms. Jones In there we're doing *House Arrest*. In her Honor's class, she's doing *The Giver*.

Mrs. Overton Okay.

Ms. Jones Yeah, that one's like, to really like wrap your head around that one.

Mrs. Overton Yeah. I read that in eighth grade. It's very abstract. It's not...

Ms. Jones It is. Yeah. So *House Arrest*, they can relate... and they even quote it. They'll be saying, like "Oh, that's just like from the book." So they are picking stuff up, because it's very relatable. It's very, like, mom is struggling. Mom has two jobs. They're not always making it. It's very much what these kids see on an everyday basis.

Mrs. Overton They get it.

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton So you said you have to get admin. approval, but are these books being incorporated... Is it like a new book every year that somebody suggests to the committee? Like, how frequent is this process?

Ms. Jones So you can. So the county I came from before, it was approved throughout the entire county. Here it's based on the school. I don't know if that's because of the populations? It's just different populations.

Mrs. Overton It's such a huge county.

Ms. Jones Yeah, so I don't know if that's why they do it. So each school has to have everything approved. So I guess we never had a book approval form at this school, so we had to do it all. So that's the way we have to go through. So any book that doesn't have the form, if we

actually want to read it, even if we have it in the building, we have to go through the approval form again and get it approved.

Mrs. Overton Okay. So do you look for specific criteria when you're choosing a book? Because I know you mentioned the kid has a disability, he's in seventh grade, there's specific names that are more relatable. So those things stood out to-

Ms. Jones Yeah. I'm not going to pick, like, obviously, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, or something for these kids, that I read in seventh grade. Yeah, I'm always going to read the book first. Over the summer, I usually do a lot of research. I actually take a lot of books out from the library and read them. And then I make a list that I think the kids would like and feel that they could relate to.

There are a lot of books on the bulletin board that I put up, that have, like, different backgrounds, different cultures, different beliefs, different sexualities. And that's what I think, that the more we expose them to, the less bias they have.

Mrs. Overton Definitely.

Ms. Jones So that's what I just try to... Like, "Oh, this is something totally different." Or, just like, "Oh, it's a middle schooler that's finding out their sexuality. Okay, great." But it's like a total person going through their life, or something. It's just, like, an everyday, just to make it, like, normalize it.

Mrs. Overton Relatable.

Ms. Jones Right. And make it relatable. That's why I just want to make it like, this is life, and it's 2020. Because when they make a comment, I'm like, "It's 2020." Somebody said something-

Mrs. Overton We're in a new decade!

Ms. Jones -that it's like, "Does the girl have to take the man's last name?" I was like, "No. It's 2020! You can keep your name if you would like to."

Mrs. Overton Definitely.

Ms. Jones I was like, "You do you."

Mrs. Overton Yeah. One of my friends, the boy and the girl, they both hyphenated the last name.

Ms. Jones Yeah.

Mrs. Overton It's 2020!

Ms. Jones You're equal parts. That's, like, it's a partnership.

Mrs. Overton Do whatever you want.

Do you think there's a proportionate representation of children with disabilities in instructional materials in the Hopkins English Department? Because I know, like, *House Arrest*, you said that there's a breathing issue. I know with *Mockingbird*, we talked about that last year, autism. I can't remember what else.

Ms. Jones *Freak the Mighty* is another one off the top of my head. I know that's an older book.

Mrs. Overton I don't know that one.

Ms. Jones I never read it myself, but I know it's about a boy that has a learning disability, I believe, that is maybe being bullied-

Mrs. Overton And that's on the approved list?

Ms. Jones ... no. I think it's an older book. I think we have it, but I don't think it's been pre-approved. But it's about a boy with a disability. But other than that, there's really nothing that's really about somebody with a disability.

Ms. Jones There is that, *A Ghost Book*, I think it's called. It's written in a graphic novel.

I think the sister has spina bifida or cystic fibrosis or something, because the kids will talk about that. Like, it's one of their graphic novels, but I think it's a type of ghost or something. So they are making more.

Mrs. Overton They're in the library right now?

Ms. Jones ... and like, *El Deafo* has the girl with the-

Mrs. Overton Oh. Yeah.

Ms. Jones That's a cute story.

Mrs. Overton Yeah. I like that one.

Ms. Jones So there are, and I have them on the board, too, just to show, like, the wide variety of books. But in the book room, no.

Mrs. Overton Okay. I remember last school year you would go to the library about every month and the kids would pick something, and then they would do their one-pager. So I collected their one-pagers twice last school year so that I could analyze... I would assign a number. Like, if you were Gen. Ed., alphabetically I would just go down one, two, three, four, five, and then, Gen Ed people had an A. And then I would go down the Sped list, one, two, three, four, five, and you would get a B. And then I submitted that data, and I basically said, like, "These are all the books

that the Gen. Ed. kids chose. These are all the books that the SpEd. kids chose." And then I went line by line, and I said, "Is there, like, a specific diverse character? Like, a different type of race or a different type of religion, that's basically not the norm in America?" So not a white, male, Protestant, Catholic-

Ms. Jones Yeah. They like those Naruto books, like those-

Mrs. Overton The Japanese books?

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton Yeah.

Ms. Jones All those mingo, or manga. They always crack me up. I forget how you say-

Mrs. Overton Manga.

Ms. Jones Manga. Yeah.

Mrs. Overton So I found that, there was that one girl, I don't even remember her name, she was Chinese, but she was adopted, and she happened to choose a book about a Chinese character. And then there was one Gen. Ed. kid that chose a book about a character that was blind. But other

than that, everything else was just like, "Oh, well I like football, so I'm going to read about football." Or like you said, "I like Manga, so I'm going to choose this graphic novel." But other than that, it wasn't really anything noteworthy.

Ms. Jones They just stuck to what they knew. They didn't branch out. They stayed in their comfort zone.

Mrs. Overton Yeah. And I remember Anna (Student of Indian descent) read a Malala book last year, too. But pretty much it was just like, I am a teenager and I want to read about these teenagers going through teenage things.

"I like the love and the romance, and the boys and texting." So there weren't really any kids, Gen. Ed., SpEd, or otherwise, that chose any books about kids with disabilities.

Ms. Jones No. And you can still see that, like, even what they take, I took my self-contained to the library today. And one kid checked out a book on science. He's into the earth, so he like-

Mrs. Overton Yeah. I remember that last year, too. They were like, "Oh, I like dinosaurs." Or "I like rock formations."

Ms. Jones -so then they stick to that section. Then another one took a book on... They do tend to stay, the self-contained tend to stay with what they know... James Patterson-

Mrs. Overton Mystery?

Ms. Jones -no. He writes similar to, like, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

Mrs. Overton Oh, okay.

Ms. Jones But I want to say I think it might be a little more advanced. Not by much, but it's the same, like, setup, design, layout, I guess, as *Diary*, because it has lots of pictures, but it's the same type of style. James Paterson does them. I think they're funny. I don't know. So they get those, or they'll get a Messi book. A lot of the boys like soccer here, so they try to get a soccer star. Or something about another... My kid just got something on the... Oh, Muhammad Ali.

Mrs. Overton Sports.

Ms. Jones So if they, "Oh, I know him." Yeah, like, "Oh, I know who that guys is. I'll read about him." So they're really not learning anything new. They're just, like, refreshing, I guess, what they already know about people, which is like, "Try learning about this person." No.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, but it's hard when you want them to read something, and then it's like-

Ms. Jones I know. It's already a struggle to get them to read.

Mrs. Overton -where do I push?

Ms. Jones Yeah. So I'm just like, okay, let them get anything. Get a magazine, because we do articles in here. So we did two articles in here about kids with disabilities. So we did one with a girl with Down syndrome that actually wrote to Scholastic about why aren't there articles about kids with disabilities?

Mrs. Overton Oh, that's cool.

Ms. Jones So that opened up a really big discussion in here about my kids and with their IEPs and everything, and how they can advocate for themselves. And there was another one with, he plays the piano. He was born with, maybe, I think, two fingers, and how he's just, like, this brilliant pianist. And he plays all these different instruments, and how he overcame. Like, just because he was born with only two fingers, that didn't limit what he could do. So just because you may look different, that doesn't mean anything. And they really did like him, once they actually heard how well he plays.

Mrs. Overton They were amazed.

Ms. Jones They were like, "Oh, wow." And I was like, "Right. Don't judge a book by its cover."

Mrs. Overton I think last year, when you guys showed that video of different people with autism, I remember one of the boys was like, "Wow, she has autism? I would have never known

that!" And they were just jaw-dropped in amazement.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And it's nice to see. They'll call each other SpEd. And I'm like, "Guys, we all are. You're using that word," and I said, "Honors kids are SpEd." I said, "Special Ed. is special education." I said, "If you're in the Honors program in school, you're technically considered Special Ed." So I said, "You're just throwing that word around, and you're really not even realizing who's under it." So just educating the kids to-

Mrs. Overton Putting it into perspective.

Ms. Jones Yeah, of how they're using the word. Because even them, themselves, the learning disability kids, think SpEd is truly the, like, the ID kids.

Mrs. Overton The self-contained.

Ms. Jones Yeah, or the physical disability kids. If they can physically see it-

Mrs. Overton Oh, so not even self-contained.

Ms. Jones No. They don't even think that they themselves are SpEd, until I'm like, "No, you guys are." They need a reality check because you're not going to-

Mrs. Overton Do you ever get pushback from parents if you say, "You have a learning

disability. You have an IEP." Do parents ever call you, like, "Why would you do this? Why would you say this?"

Ms. Jones Mm-mm (negative).

Mrs. Overton Nothing.

Ms. Jones Because they're a year shy, or some of them are 14, to where they have to be in their meetings for their transition. So some of them are just about that age anyways.

Mrs. Overton They have to go to the meeting.

Ms. Jones And they're going to have to go and be in, and their signature has to be there. And honestly, if we want them to put any effort into their education, they have to be a part of it. So we need their input. They need to be aware of why we're tracking it. Instead of making them do this work, they need to know the **why** in order to get anything out of them, or it's just, like, "This is stupid."

Mrs. Overton I saw in some instances when they're in eighth grade and they're 14 and they have to go to the meeting, that some of the parents that are not from the United States will be like, "Well, I think we'll just get rid of the IEP." Like, they'd rather just revoke consent than to have that conversation with their child, which is...

Ms. Jones Because it's like a stigma that your kid has something wrong with them.

Mrs. Overton Right. So they don't want them to continue to have that diagnosis, eligibility, whatever you want to call it, once they go to high school, because then they think like, "Oh, now it's really permanent. It's going to go on their record, and they're not going to go to college, and they're not going to get a job."

Ms. Jones And little do they know they can actually get money.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Ms. Jones Like, I got money for having-

Mrs. Overton And accommodations in college.

Ms. Jones I got accommodations. No bubble sheets. And I got money. It doesn't get better
than that!

Mrs. Overton Right. The time and the money. It's what everyone wants in life!

Ms. Jones And you get to test in your own room. It doesn't get any better than that! I'm just like, okay. And I tell the kids. I'm like, "It doesn't mean at all that you're stupid. Doesn't have

nothing to do with that. It just says you need to work in this area. That's why you're in here. You need extra help in this area. That's all an IEP say. 'You're good in this part. You need some extra work here.' That's all that this paperwork is saying." And they're like, "Oh, okay." The kids, I think, understand more than the parents, I feel sometimes, because they're in it with us. But I don't know.

Mrs. Overton So when do you think that conversation should begin? Like, if this is early on, where it's like, "Okay, you're eight-years-old. You're being diagnosed with a learning disability." Do you think that, then, the parents should reveal that? Or a teacher?

Ms. Jones I think the parents.

Mrs. Overton First?

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton Yeah.

Ms. Jones Then it's like, "Hey, you've been struggling at school. This is the reason why." Like, "Hey, you sat for all this testing, well-"

Mrs. Overton This is what this means.

Ms. Jones Yes. Like, "Hey, they found out, oh, you have some math weaknesses.

That's why you're not doing so well in math. But we're going to put this paperwork together and you'll get some help, and that's going to hopefully help turn things around for you." Just put the bright side of things on it.

Because some of the kids that **do** know... Like, we had a student last year who really did know his IEP. Really did know. Of course, he was dismissed from it. But he came in, knew what it said. He knew all about it. And there's twins we have-

Mrs. Overton How did you know that he knew? Like, what was he saying?

Ms. Jones He came in and he said, "Do you know who my case manager is?" He said, "I know I have an IEP. Do you know when my meeting is?" He would be like, "How am I doing on my goals?"

Mrs. Overton Wow!

Ms. Jones But he was a very good advocate for himself. Yeah, he tested out. He no longer needed it. And it just shows, when he was aware of it, he knew he didn't want it anymore, so he worked hard to get rid of it. And he's doing fine.

Mrs. Overton And he knew exactly what his goals were to get to that point.

Ms. Jones Yep. And he worked hard. His one goal was reading. So he worked hard. The first time, he blew the test off. And then he realized, like, "Oh, if I actually put forth effort,

then I can pass." and he did. He got out. And it's his second year without his IEP and he's doing fine.

Mrs. Overton Cool. And he's in all Gen. Ed. classes now?

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative). If they know, I think they hold it a little bit more responsible, because it's theirs. They put something else towards it.

Mrs. Overton They own it.

Ms. Jones Yeah. They own it. Yeah. They put a sense of ownership towards it. We had a kid who was ignoring his OT support. And she's really great this year. We have a really good one. But he was, like, not giving her the time of day. And his handwriting is atrocious, wasn't using the computer. Like, totally dismissing every service she was trying to give him. And she got in his face. So she literally called him out in his meeting when he was in there. Like, "You're being a jerk. When I'm in there, I'm not trying to embarrass you. But when you're pushing me out like that, I have to give you two hours. And that's a lot of time for a seventh grader."

Mrs. Overton It is.

Ms. Jones "But like, when you're doing that, it's making my job a lot harder." And homeboy turned it around.

Mrs. Overton Really?

Ms. Jones Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton He improved?

Ms. Jones He was a totally different human being after break. Like he was much more respectful to her. And I said, "What happened?" She's like, "Oh, I called him out in front of his mother, about how he was treating me, about not using his services." And he needs to, because his writing is-

Mrs. Overton Can't read it.

Ms. Jones You can't read his writing. He's a smart kid, and that's what's the frustrating part. It's like, "We know that you know this, but we can't read it. So either you have to tell us," and he's not the type that's going to do it, "or you have to use your resources that we're giving you."

Mrs. Overton So what do you think parents should know about the special education process, like, post high school?

Ms. Jones That there are other resources out there. It just doesn't, like, stop.

Mrs. Overton It's not just like, "Okay, you've graduated, and you're done. Figure it out."

Ms. Jones Right. Because they are... Now, I don't know exactly, because I didn't do it here in this state, but I know in Pennsylvania that I went through Office of Rehabilitation Services, and that's how I got my stuff for college. So they checked up on me for years to make sure, "Was I employed? How was my job going? What type of income did I have?" They don't just, like, leave you high and dry.

Mrs. Overton They kept following you.

Ms. Jones Right. They make sure you were stable, you had a place to live, that you were, like, a human being in society, making it. And that's what we want, these kids to be independent. So that's why we keep saying we want them to be independent. That's why, in middle school, and the parents like, "Oh, they're still in middle school, though." But it's like, "Yeah, but in five years they're going to be out on their own. It's going to happen fast."

Mrs. Overton They have to think about it now.

Ms. Jones Right. So we're building them up. And yeah, these kids, they don't advocate for themselves. So we have to push them harder now, because that real world's going to hit them faster than, I think, the parents realize it. And yeah, they have all this support now, but they need to know, when they're out there, like, "Okay. I am a struggling reader, so how am I going to do that on my own, out there?"

Mrs. Overton Get the strategies.

Ms. Jones Right. And then the parents, too, following up. Like, following up on their end, that there are those parent resources for them to access for their students. And there's, like, community centers if they're, like, a lower IQ, like an intellectual disability.

Mrs. Overton Oh, really?

Ms. Jones There's, like, community centers. There's different programs for kids that they can get into after high school and stuff.

Mrs. Overton So it's never really over.

Ms. Jones No. It's never over.

Mrs. Overton Even if you're 40, you could probably call the office and ask them for assistance?

Ms. Jones Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Mrs. Overton Great! Anything else you want to share about your experience in team-taught or self-contained setting, or anything related to text selection?

Ms. Jones I think team-teaching works well if you have the... it's like a marriage, honestly. If you don't have the relationship-

Mrs. Overton It's not going to work.

Ms. Jones Uh-uh (negative). This is my eighth year, and the last four years I've been blessed with amazing team teachers. And there's been times where I haven't been able to have a voice in the classroom, it was just like an IA (instructional assistant).

Mrs. Overton Yeah. I've seen that.

Ms. Jones And that's so-

Mrs. Overton I feel like that's more frequent.

Ms. Jones Right. It's so frustrating.

Mrs. Overton The marriage is usually not equal.

Ms. Jones And the kids just said to us today, like, "You guys are the perfect match." And it's nice to know they're... When I was out sick two days, right before break, she called me to fill me in on everything that happened. They're like, "The kids wanted you to know this." And it's

like they recognized that I wasn't there. And half of them don't even really know. Like, I get it-

Mrs. Overton Like, who's who?

Ms. Jones Yeah, that you don't want them to know you're special... but they see my computer. It has my label on it. They know I pull some kids. But nobody ever questions it or asks. But we do use both rooms simultaneously, just to break up to do smaller groups. And the kids come in here to get stuff. Like, it's very open. I'm not like, "You can't go in my room. You don't have class in there. You can't go in my other room." It's like, this is-

Mrs. Overton And you would never say to a Gen. Ed. kid, like, "Sorry, can't work with you."

Ms. Jones Yeah, no. Right?

Mrs. Overton And some people do that. They're like, "That's not my job."

Ms. Jones Yeah, and the Gen. Ed. kids sometimes they need **more** support, because you do focus on the SpEd kids more, because they're the ones that have, like, they're the names that you recognize. And then, Gen. Ed. kids are just like, "Oh!"

I mean, I like working with the Gen. Ed. kids, too, and it just shows that's like... and the SpEd kids, it does show that the SpEd kids aren't really that SpEd, I guess, if we want to compare them. Because looking at the grade book, my grades for SpEd side is not... Like, sometimes you

can tell there's a big gap, but this year, the gap isn't... like, our kids are pretty close this year. So it's nice to see. And our kids are reading a lot this year.

Mrs. Overton Good.

Ms. Jones But it is the Mangas, and the... So it's not, like, huge novels.

Mrs. Overton The graphic novels.

Ms. Jones A couple of the readers are, like, they're still doing *Mockingbird*... I think when that stuff came out, *The Hunger Games*, *Mockingbird*, those were huge. But I think when that series is over, like, there's nothing big like that drawing them in. Now it's those short, quick reads, which is good. But those Manga, there's not a lot of... The words are unknown to them, but it's also in, like, another language. So it's like, are they really comprehending? Or are they just comprehending the pictures to make the story? So it's like, are they reading the words, or are they looking at the picture to make the story? So I don't know. It's kind of like a...

Mrs. Overton Oh, and that kind of reminded me, I don't know why, last year with the SOLs and just the terrible experience of saying, "You failed. You passed."

Ms. Jones Oh, I hated that.

Mrs. Overton And then, you're comforting them and you're like, "This is not who you are.

Don't worry about your score. When I was your age, I failed this reading test, so you'll get through this." And I felt like that was such a hard day.

Ms. Jones I hate that day.

Mrs. Overton Even the people that passed, they're like, "Yeah, I passed. Passed advanced!" it's like bragging on other people. But then there were other people that were so close to passing, and they retook the test, and they still didn't pass. It was just so sad.

Ms. Jones Because they put their... And that test is long. And it varies between, I forget, like 40 and 60 questions. I forget what the... I think 60 is the max they could be given. So I mean, that's a long test. And those passages are not short for any, like Gen. Ed., SpEd, Honors, that is a long test to sit through. So the endurance that they have to have, it's already challenging. And then to sit through that. And then, if they got like a 399, like-

Mrs. Overton I know.

Ms. Jones I don't want to be the person that tells them that you missed it by one point. Are you kidding me? Like, that is such a slap in the face.

Mrs. Overton There's got to be a better way of-

Ms. Jones And I hate that.

Mrs. Overton -doing that process, revealing the score.

Ms. Jones Especially if we had kids like Emma. I don't know if you remember her.

Mrs. Overton Sounds familiar.

Ms. Jones She worked, worked, worked, worked, worked.

Mrs. Overton She didn't pass.

Ms. Jones I don't want to tell her that. Because that girl would put every sweat and blood

and tear into that. She wasn't... We knew going into it she wasn't going to pass. But that girl was going to-

Mrs. Overton Did she take it again?

Ms. Jones She didn't even come close.

Mrs. Overton She didn't.

Ms. Jones But it's like she sat and took her time, and she tried and tried. The girl put

her all into it.

Mrs. Overton She did it, like, all day.

Ms. Jones And you still have to go tell her that she's going to fail. Are you kidding me? I hate that we do that to these kids.

Mrs. Overton They shouldn't even be taking it, I don't think.

Ms. Jones No.

Mrs. Overton The self-contained kids.

Ms. Jones She's not. She didn't qualify. She doesn't... yeah. There was no discrepancy in her scores. But it's frustrating.

Mrs. Overton It sucks.

Ms. Jones And I just, I hate it, because it's just like, you don't take a test in real life to... I mean, you do. But you also don't. Like, I didn't have to take a test to get this job. I mean, I needed the test to get my license, but...

Mrs. Overton I mean, you took the SAT, but that was like the last...

Ms. Jones Yeah, but they also look at other things, though, to see, like, my community service, what type of person am I? That's why you also have other things they look at. But these kids, we were purely looking at SOL scores. They could have clicked on the right answer, also.

Mrs. Overton That's like John. He just goes... *pretends to aimlessly click a computer mouse*

Ms. Jones Yeah. "I'm done."

Mrs. Overton Yeah. In five minutes.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And I'm just like, okay. So I don't like SOLs.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, I don't either.

Ms. Jones They're stupid. We're already getting rid of so many.

Mrs. Overton It's all about the money. It's about school funding and what we can do with the money.

Ms. Jones And like, getting our school SIP, or whatever, is-

Mrs. Overton Oh, the School Improvement Plan?

Ms. Jones I hate how we word it. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Mrs. Overton Why?

Ms. Jones You know the wording of it?

Mrs. Overton No.

Ms. Jones It's "getting our Black disability students to close the gap between our white students."

Mrs. Overton Wow! Who wrote that?

Ms. Jones Our SIP team. It's clearly black versus white.

Mrs. Overton Interesting.

Ms. Jones My skin was, like, boiling. And I was like-

Mrs. Overton What were other teachers saying about that?

Ms. Jones Oh, it's in our whole thing. But I'm just like, we're never going to close that gap with disabilities. These kids have a disability.

Mrs. Overton Right. You're saying closing the gap for Black children with disabilities, versus white children that do not have disabilities?

Ms. Jones I think they want to somehow make the gap smaller, because there's such a big difference. But I'm like, if you look in the school alone, Black isn't our highest population. I would think Hispanic would be.

Mrs. Overton Yeah, I think so, too.

Ms. Jones Or maybe a combination. But I mean, I don't know. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but I'm just like, you cannot compare. That's like comparing apples to oranges, you can't do it.

Mrs. Overton No, you can't do that.

Ms. Jones You're not going to make an apple out of an orange.

Mrs. Overton You can't do that.

Ms. Jones All these SpEd kids are not going to... all these self-contained kids are not

going

to just start passing these SOLs. I mean, they were given an IEP because they have a disability for a reason. I don't know. These are unrealistic goals, I feel like. I mean, yeah, you want everybody to pass, and be successful in school. And they can be. But maybe they're not going to show it on a test.

Mrs. Overton There's a zero percent chance that everybody will pass the SOL.

Ms. Jones Right.

Mrs. Overton It's just facts.

Ms. Jones Right. And if these parents really knew that they can just say, "I don't want my kid taking it."

Mrs. Overton Especially eighth grade. There's so many.

Ms. Jones I had a parent that didn't want her kid taking it, because it was going to cause him all this anxiety. She was like, "Bye." I said, "Type a letter up." And the principal told me to tell her to do that.

Mrs. Overton Good.

Ms. Jones I called her on the phone. I said, "I'm not putting this in writing, but please send me a letter saying you don't want your son to take it."

Mrs. Overton Right.

Ms. Jones It was too much, and the kid was brilliant.

Mrs. Overton He was eighth grade or seventh?

Ms. Jones He was eighth grade. And the kid was brilliant. Off the charts brilliant. He had autism. But it was like, his SOLs, the way they had, it was like day after day. That was too much for him. It was too much for anybody.

Mrs. Overton Right.

Ms. Jones And she was like, "He's not sleeping." He hasn't rocked in almost two years, and he was just rocking constantly. Because it was the eighth grade one where he had all of them. And I was just like-

Mrs. Overton Don't do it.

Ms. Jones No. It was like the writing one. I was like, "Take him out of it." Or civics or something. And I was like, "No. It's fine."

Mrs. Overton You can't do that in high school though, right?

Ms. Jones I don't think so.

Mrs. Overton Because you have to have the SOLs to graduate.

Ms. Jones I think you need it to graduate. But I was like, it's not worth it, putting a kid through that.

Mrs. Overton No.

Ms. Jones He's a kid. He's a kid first. That's what I tell the kids, too. Like, "Go be a kid. Play. Go. Have fun and play." And that's like we taught today. We talked about King Tut. I said it for, like, a proper noun. And they're like, "Well, who's King Tut?" And I was like, "I don't know. Let's look him up. Who is King Tut?" And I was like, "I don't know, guys. He was probably, like, a prince or something." And they're like, "Actually, Ms. Jones, he was a king, right?" And I was like, "You guys are right."

Mrs. Overton Actually, yes!

Ms. Jones I was like, "You are correct." And I was like, "It is Friday for a reason, ladies and gentlemen." But it's like, to be human around them, they totally respect that so much

more, and just to know that you're human, they know you make mistakes.

Mrs. Overton Right, mistakes.

Ms. Jones And they're like, "Ooh, those are," the one kid touched my case. He was like, "What is it?" I was like, "For my braces. Nasty. Don't touch it." "Ooh, that was in your?" "Yeah. Quit touching my stuff."

But it was just like, I don't know, they think if you're a human being it totally makes it... Think some teachers are like...

Mrs. Overton Yeah. There are so many studies that it's like, if they don't like you, they're not going to learn from you.

Ms. Jones They're not going to learn from you.

Mrs. Overton They're not going to work. They're not going to want to be challenged. They're going to think that you're against them, and you're bullying them, basically. And you're pushing them and pushing them to make them angry, not to make them improve. And so I think that that's the first thing. And I always do that with my first speech therapy session. We play games. I ask questions. "Tell me what you like to do after school. Tell me who do you live with? What kind of food do you like to eat? Have you ever been outside of the country?" I'm not addressing goals at all the first few sessions.

Ms. Jones No. We don't even do that here, at the beginning. No, we did Apples to Apples on the first day, just to get to know them. And one, they're playing a game. They don't realize they're doing work. And two, I can hear, like, what words they actually do know. What are those-

Mrs. Overton So you can get your data.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And I can hear, like, okay, so they don't know which... And there is a kid that really stands out when we were playing that. He didn't know very simple, like, two-syllable words. He wasn't pronouncing them correctly. And I'm like, okay, he's a really struggling reader. And he also misses a lot of school, so that's good to know. But we always did that. And I know a lot about his background. I know almost all these kids' families.

Mrs. Overton Their culture.

Ms. Jones Like, who's in their family, their culture, what country they're from, or where their parents are from. Because they're all from somewhere different, and they all are very proud. Like, if they're from El Salvador, or if they're from Guatemala.

Mrs. Overton And you showed me that project last time we met, where they all did different-

Ms. Jones Oh, this one? Yeah, they're on the walls.

Mrs. Overton Oh, nice. Yeah. You showed me on your laptop last time.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And they really like that, because they wrote about, like, where I'm from.

And then they made the collage of themselves.

Mrs. Overton With the flag.

Ms. Jones Yeah, we have a little Trinidad and Tobago flag... Is that how you say it?

Mrs. Overton Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ms. Jones Yeah. We have almost every type of Hispanic culture represented in this room. Asian, Black. I'm the only white one. Because one kid's like, "I'm the only Black kid." And I was like, "Well, I'm the only white one, so there's that."

Mrs. Overton There's that.

Ms. Jones He's like, "You are, right?" And I was like, "Yeah. I am." Every time I'm in the self-contained room, I'm the only white kid. But I mean, I don't notice it, and I like it.

Because I like to learn from them, because I grew up where it's not... Like Pittsburgh, you were Jewish or Black or white.

Mrs. Overton Right. Polish.

Ms. Jones Yeah. And you didn't have all this diversity. I like learning about them.

Mrs. Overton Cool!

Ms. Jones Thanks a lot!

Mrs. Overton Thank you.

Ms. Jones Welcome.

Mrs. Overton I'm going to turn off the recording.

Ms. Jones Oh, I forgot we were still on!

Curriculum Vitae
Courtney Overton, Ed.D., CCC-SLP

Education

Ed.D., Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 2023
Primary Focus: Literacy, Culture, and Language Education
Secondary Focus: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Certificate, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 2022
Entrepreneurship

M.S., Emerson College, Boston, MA 2013
Communication Sciences and Disorders

B.A., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 2010
Major: Communication Science and Disorders
Minor: Linguistics
Certificate: American Sign Language

Study Abroad, University of Virginia, Semester at Sea 2009

Licensure

Licensed Speech-Language Pathologist
State of Maryland 2023
State of Virginia 2014
State of New Jersey 2013

Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology
American Speech-Language Hearing Association 2014

University Experience

Emerson College Online Master's Program
Adjunct Professor 2021-2023
CD635 Speech Sound Disorders

University of Maryland College Park, MD
Assistant Clinical Professor & LEAP Preschool Director 2023-Present
Co-Instructor 2019-2021
HESP402 Language and Phonological Disorders in Children
Teaching Assistant 2019-2021
HESP616 Preschool Child Language Disorders
HESP626 School-Age Child Language Disorders
Project Manager 2018-2021
Child Language Assessment Project

Clinical Experience

Speech of Cake, Inc. Alexandria, VA
Founder, CEO, & Speech-Language Pathologist 2016-Present
Clinical Fellow Mentor & Clinical Supervisor 2018-Present

Fairfax County Public Schools Alexandria, VA
Lead Speech-Language Pathologist 2016-2017
Speech-Language Pathologist 2015-2019

Monroe Township Public Schools Williamstown, NJ
Speech-Language Pathologist 2013-2014

Related Professional Experience

St. Clair Learning Center Alexandria, VA
Owner, Founder, & Executive Director 2020-2021

Scholastic New York, NY
Summer Associate 2013

Y.A.L.E. School Voorhees, NJ
Teaching Assistant 2010-2011

The Watson Institute Pittsburgh, PA
Summer Associate 2010

Publications

Book

Overton, C., Roberes, J., Augustine, D., Clark Jackson, D., McClenney-Rosenstein, L., Pompeo, C., & Zucker, B. (2023). *The speech-language pathologist's guide to dyslexia*. SLP Publishing House.

Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

Overton, C., Baron, T., Pearson, B. Z., & Ratner, N. B. (2021). Using free computer assisted language sample analysis to evaluate and set treatment goals for children who speak African American English. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*.

Peer-Reviewed Presentations

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, November). *Cultural awareness: Examining implicit bias to diversify the field*. Presented at the Annual Convention of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. Washington, DC.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, July). *Take Action: Diversify the field of speech-language pathology through career outreach*. Presented at the American Speech-Language Hearing Association Schools Connect Convention. Online.

Overton, C., Lee, V., & Ratner, N. B. (2021, July). *Detecting disorder: Different language sample measures for different ages?* Presented at the International Association for the Study of Child Language. Philadelphia, PA.

Overton, C. & Ratner, N. B. (2021, March). *Computerized language sample analysis for African American English speakers*. Presented at the National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing Convention. Houston, TX.

Overton, C. (2020, October). *Blurring the line: Dialect difference vs. disorder*. Presented at the International Conference on Literacy, Culture, and Language Education, Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

Overton, C., Pearson, B. Z., Ratner, N. B., MacWhinney, B., Hyter, Y., and Nelson, N. (2020, August). *Further development of the CLAN automatic scoring program for developmental sentence scoring (DSS) to incorporate guidelines of Black English sentence scoring (BESS)*. Presented at the Advancing African American Linguist(ic)s Symposium, University of California. Santa Barbara, CA.

Peer-Reviewed Posters

Overton, C. & Baron, T. (2020, November). *Create IEP goals aligned with common core state standards with free computerized language sample analysis*. Proposal accepted at the Annual Convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. San Diego, CA. (Convention canceled)

Overton, C., Perry, V., & Builes, V. (2019, June). *How many utterances and what LSA measures are required to be able to diagnose a preschool age child with a language disorder?* Poster presented at Language Emergence: Competition, Usage, and Analyses. Pittsburgh, PA.

Perry, V., Overton, C., Builes, V., & Ratner, N. B. (2019, November). *One size doesn't fit all: An analysis of language sampling measures among preschool children*. Poster presented at the Annual Convention of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. Orlando, FL.

Overton, C., Perry, V., Builes, V., & Ratner, N. B. (2019, November). *How long is long enough? Utilizing LSA to detect preschool language disorders*. Poster presented at the Annual Convention of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. Orlando, FL.

Invited Talks and Keynotes

Overton, C. (2022, November). Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with Disabilities. George Washington University.

Overton, C. & Royster, C. (2022, October). Multicultural Issues in Human Communication. George Washington University.

Overton, C. & Royster, C. (2022, October). Examining Implicit Bias and Culturally Sustaining SLP Practices. Maryland Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2022, October). Disproportionalities in Special Education. Binghamton University.

Overton, C. & Royster, C. (2022, June). Ways to Diversify the Field, Implicit Bias, & Barriers to Entering the Profession. SLP Coffee Talk.

Overton, C. (2022, February). Navigating the Black Kaleidoscope(s) of Language and Culture. Mozilla Foundation.

Overton, C. (2021, October). How to Start a Private Practice. Virginia Tech.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, July). Recruiting Diverse Students for Graduate Programs. Children's National Hospital.

Overton, C. (2021, May). African American English: How to Determine Difference vs. Disorder. Bright Ideas Media.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, April). National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Portland State University.

Overton, C. & Jaramillo, A. (2021, March). Cultural and Linguistic Diversity. Speech Therapy PD.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, March). Dynamic Assessment for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations. Speech Therapy PD.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, February). Diversifying the Field of Speech-Language Pathology. George Washington University.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, January). Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Speech and Language Services. Speech Therapy PD.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2021, January). Cultural and Linguistic Diversity. Kaiser's Room.

Overton, C. (2020, October). Black SLPs in Private Practice Telesummit. The SLP Business Suite.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2020, October). National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Indiana University.

Overton, C. (2020, October). Understanding Dyslexia: Confronting the Dyslexia Diagnosis Gap. Smiles for Speech.

Overton, C. (2020, September). Graduate School, Business Ownership, & Faculty Membership. Fresh SLP.

Overton, C. & Hutchison, L. (2017, November; 2018, April; 2020, September). ADHD, Dyslexia, & Executive Functioning Disorder. Children and Adults with ADD (CHADD).

Overton, C. & Jaramillo, A. (2020, August; 2021, August). How to Be an Anti-Racist SLP. Emerson College.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2020, June). Real Talk: Let's Diversify the Field. DiverCity SLP.

Overton, C. & Royster, C. (2019, June). Therapeutic Camp Staff Training. Arlington, VA Parks & Recreation.

Overton, C., Royster, C., & Jaramillo, A. (2018, December to Present). Becoming an SLP. DiverCity SLP.

Overton, C. (2018, November). Cultural Dynamics in the Diagnosis of Communication Disorders. Access Champions.

Overton, C. (2018, September). National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association. University of the District of Columbia.

Memberships

American Speech-Language Hearing Association
 For(bes) the Culture
 International Dyslexia Association
 International Literacy Association
 National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing
 Pearl and Ivy Educational Foundation, Inc.

Service to Profession

Speech of Cake Foundation Alexandria, VA 2019-Present
Mentor

DiverCity SLP Washington, DC 2018-Present
Mentor & Public Speaker

Project Rise College Park, MD 2020-2021
Mentor

Pearl and Ivy Educational Foundation, Inc. Washington, DC 2016-2017
Board Member

Honors & Awards

American Speech-Language Hearing Association, *Award for Continuing Education*, 2019, 2021, 2022

Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, *Alexandria, VA 40 Under 40*, 2020

Emerson College, *Alumni of the Year*, 2021

Expertise, Best Speech Pathologists of Washington, DC, 2019, 2020

International Association of Healthcare Professionals, *Top Speech-Language Pathologists of Washington, DC*, 2019

Leadership Center for Excellence, *Northern Virginia 40 Under 40*, 2021

Northern Virginia Magazine, *Best Summer Camp*, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

The State of Black Educators, *Courageous Educator of the Year*, 2020

Washington Business Journal, *Washington, DC 40 Under 40*, 2022