

IMPLICIT BIAS AND LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF
CERTIFIED EDUCATORS

By

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of Connecticut's certified educators related to implicit bias and student placement. The theory of intersectionality suggests that implicit bias is present within all individuals (Crenshaw, 2017). Thus, there is a natural propensity for implicit bias, specific to ability, among school personnel. The problem to be addressed is the need for a greater understanding of how the natural existence of implicit bias among certified educators impacts their view of student capabilities and achievement, thus impacting placement decisions in the classroom. Eight participants completed individual, semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed, re-storied and member checked. Data analysis was completed after the re-storied narratives were manually coded. Three themes emerged from the coded re-storied narratives: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (b) lack of guidance and training related to the least restrictive environment (LRE) and (c) lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias. Key findings in this study are connected to prior research studies, including a connection to the benefits of inclusion, a lack of skill set or support of from general and special education teachers and a lack of professional development related to least restrictive environment and/or implicit bias. Recommendations from this study include ongoing professional development related to the least restrictive environment and implicit bias, the implementation of common planning time for general and special education teachers, and the implementation of co-teaching models.

Keywords: *General education, implicit bias, least restrictive environment, professional development, special education*

DEDICATION

To my parents, who from a very early age instilled a belief that I could accomplish anything through dedication. You modeled support of each other for each of your goals. Your own persistence, talent, and wisdom are cherished.

To my children, each of you have contributed to this process in a unique way:

To my daughter Penny, your love of learning is an inspiration.

To my son Jack, your commitment to hard work is an inspiration.

To my daughter Ana, your creativity is admirable.

To my daughter Gia, your ambition is amazing.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) formally required school districts to provide education to students with disabilities. Since its initial implementation, the law has been revised several times, including a revision in 1990, which changed the name to reflect societal norms, renaming the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Another reauthorization was enacted in 2004. Since then, several revisions have been made to address uniformity in the interpretation of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023). These revisions formalized the idea of the least restrictive environment (LRE). This legal mandate aimed to provide students with the maximum time possible in a general education setting. If a team perceives that a student did not thrive in the general education environment, they are obliged to ascertain the requisite additional supports or services necessary to aid the student (IDEA, 2004). Section 300.321 of IDEA outlines team members as the parent, special education professionals, general education professionals, school administration, and when appropriate, the student (IDEA, 2004). Ideally, the team would consider supports and services to be implemented in the general education setting before considering the removal from the general education environment. Similarly, section 300.115 of this legislation mandates a continuum of alternative placements, to tailor programs effectively for students while aligning with the goal of the IDEA. IDEA's goal is to educate students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004). A continuum of services would include generalized alternative placements for students, with gradual decreased time in general education. The continuum of services is a culminating factor in that it allows districts to fully implement IDEA regulations while still educating students within their community school (McGovern, 2015).

Since its implementation, IDEA has dramatically increased time spent in general education for students with disabilities in kindergarten through high school IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023). In the 2020-2021 school year, public schools educated 7.5 million students with disabilities, compared to only 1.8 million prior to 1975 IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023). The goal of IDEA, to have students educated in the LRE, has made significant strides. Data from 2020-2021 shows that 66% of students with disabilities spent over 80% of their school day in classrooms with non-disabled peers (Open Data Platform, 2023). Thus, the implementation of IDEA has not only significantly increased the time student with disabilities spend in general education settings but also reflects substantial progress towards achieving the goal of educating students in the least restrictive environment.

The passing of IDEA federal law increased services for students with disabilities; however, LRE continues to be an area of ambiguity, as evidenced by the continued disagreement over LRE (Reiner, 2018). The continued debate exists in part because terms (e.g., mainstream and inclusion) used to help determine LRE are not part of federal law, and thus, not defined by federal law (Underwood, 2018). A student's LRE is discussed in many individualized education plan (IEP) team meetings; however, the meaning of LRE continues to be an area of debate, which creates inconsistencies in the implementation of LRE at each level: districts, states, and nation. One of the largest areas of debate includes whether LRE is a physical space/place or a continuum of supports and services (Sauer & Johnson, 2016).

The diversity of positions within the field of education, held by this researcher, has led to the motivation to conduct additional research concerning LRE. In the state of Connecticut, as a special education administrator, this researcher has over a decade of experience attending IEP team meetings that discuss restrictive placements. The researcher also has experience as an in-

district equity leader. Motivated by these collective experiences, this researcher aimed to investigate and comprehend implicit bias specific to ability among educators in Connecticut, as well as the extent to which these biases affect student placement in the LRE. The researcher in this study intended to explore the extent to which certified educators in Connecticut perceive and comprehend their personal implicit biases regarding ability level, as well as the specific implicit biases related to students identified with special education labels such as intellectually disabled (ID) and emotionally disabled (ED). The study anticipated delving into the experiences of certified educators as they navigate the program decisions for students labeled with ID and ED. Part of the narrative inquiry will also explore Connecticut's certified educators' thoughts related to student capabilities and achievement regarding student placement decisions and time spent in general education.

This narrative inquiry study examined the experiences of Connecticut's certified public educators and their participation in determining student LRE, as well as their awareness and understanding of implicit bias related to ability level. The researcher anticipated that this information may be used to support in-district professional development for education professionals. The aim was to recognize and address implicit bias during IEP placement meetings. Training and continued professional development have the potential to decrease implicit bias, although difficult to eradicate (Meissel et al., 2016).

Definition of Key Terms

Ableism/Ability. Limited expectations associated with prejudicial assumptions regarding the ability level of persons with disabilities (Poed & Fox, 2023).

Certified Educators. Individuals who have earned a bachelor's or advanced degree to the state, completed an educator program successfully, and obtained official certification (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2024).

Emotional Disability. Determined by the IEP team when a student consistently exhibits one or more of the specific criteria over an extended period, significantly affecting their educational progress, which may include difficulties in establishing and sustaining relationships and challenges in effectively managing a broad range of emotions in typical situations (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). As outlined by IDEA (2004), guarantees every student the right to a free/no-cost program provided in the least restrictive environment (Lim, 2020).

General Education Environment. Any classroom that uses grade level instruction to teach standards-based content (White et al., 2023).

Implicit Bias. Unconscious thoughts related to societal stereotypes (Woods, 2018).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Federal law that requires all students have access to a free and appropriate public education (Lim, 2020).

Intellectual Disability. A disability category, characterized by below-average adaptive skills and an IQ of 69 or lower, as assessed on cognitive evaluations administered before the age of 18 (IDEA, 2004).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). As outlined in IDEA, proponents advocate for educating students with disabilities to the fullest extent possible within an inclusive environment (IDEA, 2004).

Paraeducator. An employee of the school system, assigned to assist in the instruction of students, oftentimes, special education students (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2024).

Special Education Continuum. Developed by each school district, a series of special education instruction and related services (IDEA, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

According to the theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw (2017) asserts the presence of implicit bias within all individuals. Thus, there is a natural propensity for implicit bias, specific to ability, among school personnel (Starck et al., 2020). The problem addressed was the need for a greater understanding of how the innate presence of implicit bias among certified educators impacts their view of student capabilities and achievement, thus impacting placement decisions in the classroom. This study aimed to investigate the impact of implicit bias on placement decisions for students with ID and ED in Connecticut schools, exploring its relationship with restricted access to general education environments. Furthermore, there is a tendency among educators to harbor biases that assume students with intellectual disabilities are incapable of engaging in a general education setting. According to White et al. (2023) various perceptions of administrators were examined, revealing that 25% of the participating administrators believed that providing access to suitable environmental supports posed a hindrance for students with intellectual disabilities in accessing the general education environment.

Many students with ID are given modified, unrelated curricula (Hanreddy & Östlund, 2020). This longstanding practice has been extensively researched for decades, culminating in a comprehensive three-volume study that was published and submitted to the United States government in 1971 (Budoff & Conant, 1971). Additional research conducted in the 1970s

revealed that students of color and students of lower socio-economic classes were more likely to be segregated (Michigan Law Review, 1973). It is noteworthy that in the 1970s, IQ tests were primarily employed to categorize students as ID and were criticized for their bias (Michigan Law Review, 1973). These culminating factors have led to the segregation of students with disabilities.

The problem of bias persists when an IEP team determines if students with ID need to be educated in a self-contained classroom (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). A self-contained classroom is second only to homebound tutoring on the special education continuum of services (IDEA, 2004). Likewise, students with ED may be placed in a self-contained program if their IEP teams find that they are unable to function behaviorally, in a general education setting (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). This is largely because general education teachers enact fewer strategies for behaviors associated with ED. Further, the perception that such strategies are important to implement was significantly higher among special education teachers than general education teachers (Gable et al., 2012). Resource teachers impart slightly more appropriate behavioral strategies than general education teachers, but self-contained teachers implement the most strategies for students with ED (Evans et al., 2012). The culminating factor is that research proves self-contained programs offer lower student expectations and are less rigorous in nature (Hanreddy & Östlund, 2020). This is augmented by the findings that teachers associate the concept of inclusion with placement (Øen & Krumsvik, 2022). The misunderstanding of intensive services existing exclusively in restrictive environments has led to the placement of students in segregated environments, creating two separate systems of education: one of special education and one of general education (Lim, 2020). Furthermore, the restrictive environments are represented by a disproportionate number of students both in gender and race (Wehmeyer et

al., 2021). Additionally, the disagreement over the definition of LRE as a place or a series of services creates confusion, disagreement, and impacts placement (Bolourian et al., 2018).

Students in the United States diagnosed with ED experience a reduced graduation rate and an increased likelihood of incarceration as a consequence of these factors (Wilkins & Bost, 2014). It is significant to note that the lack of effective education for ID and ED students is a worldwide phenomenon as evidenced by similar research conducted in Europe and Asia (Behzadnia et al., 2022; Øen & Krumsvik, 2022). This study was based on Connecticut certified educators' experiences and perceptions of implicit bias related to ability. However, the researcher included peer-reviewed research from the United States and other countries, to illustrate a worldwide thematic issue. This researcher sought to explore the experiences of Connecticut certified educators related to their participation in student placement decisions, particularly those decisions that restrict student's full participation in the general education environment. The researcher investigated the relationship between implicit bias specific to ability and placement decisions resulting in ID and ED students in restrictive settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators' perceptions of students' capabilities in relation to the ID and ED associated with LRE. Implicit bias is unconscious in its nature, and thus difficult to identify (Brownstein, 2019). Bias within individuals, across multiple sectors, referred to as intersectionality, may also include perceived ability, race, and gender (Crenshaw, 2017). The researcher sought to explore how implicit bias may impact educators' perceptions of students with an educational label of ID and ED. The researcher anticipates sharing insights from the completed study with Connecticut school district leaders and equity teams. This information

aims to highlight the importance of implementing or sustaining training programs for identifying implicit bias, particularly within IEP teams.

Research Questions and Design

The following research questions were developed to explore the experiences of certified educators in LRE placement, in relation to their implicit bias. Moreover, the research questions aimed to comprehend the experiences of certified educators regarding barriers that may hinder positive progress towards overcoming implicit bias in education. These research questions were instrumental in developing the interview protocol.

Research Question 1: What actions do Connecticut educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to the least restrictive environment?

Research Question 2: What barriers do certified Connecticut educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement the least restrictive environment?

Research Question 3: What professional development experiences have informed Connecticut educators' ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to the least restrictive environment?

This narrative inquiry study explored the role of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators' perception of least restrictive environment. Further, the study analyzed the outcome of any implicit bias related to student ability, concerning the least restrictive environment. This methodology was chosen because the researcher intended to learn about the experiences of educators in participating in placement discussions of students with ID and ED. The researcher also hoped to identify common themes among participants' experiences related to personal bias and placement determination of students with special education labels. The researcher utilized

urban school district web-based directories to identify certified special and general education teachers. The presence of a general education and a special education teacher on the IEP team is mandated when the student participates in the general education setting (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022). The researcher aimed to have professionals required on the IEP team, to participate in this study.

The researcher anticipated enlisting a range of participants, with a minimum of five and a maximum of eight individuals for semi-structured interviews. The researcher hoped to have an equal representation of special educators and general educators. The number of participants was selected based on the researcher's review of literature. The literature reflects that teams in the field of education during the post-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) era, as observed in several narrative inquiry studies, typically consisted of three to nine participants (Coleman, 2023; Courduff & Muktari, 2022; Walters et al., 2023). This methodology was chosen based on prior research conducted in similar content areas. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe narrative inquiry as a collaborative process that involves mutual storytelling and re-storying as the research progresses. As they begin to live out the shared story of narrative inquiry, researchers must be conscious of building a relationship where both voices are heard. The insights gained from team members' experiences contributed to a deeper understanding of the educational perspectives and experiences of Connecticut certified educators.

The researcher utilized district directories, available on district websites, to obtain email addresses. The researcher actively engaged voluntary participants by sending email solicitations and invitations to conduct unstructured interviews. This methodology was chosen based on prior research conducted in similar content areas (Knibb & Tahar, 2013). Participants were afforded the opportunity to freely discuss topics often of a personal and sensitive nature, aiming to utilize

these experiences to underscore the necessity for additional resources and training pertaining to ableism and implicit bias in the public education system. Similarly, a narrative inquiry methodology helps educators gain a better understanding of the experiences in urban districts, related to selecting placement for students with ID and ED (Knibb & Tahar, 2013).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was founded on the assumption that the researcher would determine the existence of implicit bias among certified educators, as well as the degree to which implicit bias impacts decisions related to the LRE. The researcher utilized the works of Connelly and Clandinin (1990) as a model for creating this narrative inquiry study. Connelly and Clandinin were pioneers in the utilization of narrative inquiry, emphasizing its significance in comprehending the experiences of individuals within the field of education. The narrative inquiry model seeks to understand individuals' experiences in three distinct dimensions; temporal, social, spatial (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). This narrative inquiry study examined each of the three dimensions to understand the perceptions of certified educators. Grounded in the concept that implicit bias is inherit to all human beings, the researcher anticipated identifying implicit bias related to special education labels, ability, gender, and race (Brownstein, 2019).

The theoretical framework for this narrative inquiry study helped inform the research and identified the nature of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators as well as the outcomes of implicit bias on students' LRE. Implicit bias theory was used to drive the research in seeking the identification of implicit bias in certified educators. The theory of implicit bias emphasizes unconscious reactions toward groups, frequently generalized through stereotypes (Brownstein, 2019). Banaji (2017) became fascinated with unconscious bias in the 1990s. Banaji uncovered a

correlation between the perception of female and male names, in contrast to how female names are typically perceived. Shortly thereafter, Banaji partnered with a colleague to investigate implicit bias across various social groups. They employed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure implicit bias. The theory positing that implicit bias operates unconsciously guided the research in this study.

This research utilized the implicit bias theory to focus specifically on those identified as special education students. This researcher also recognizes the theory of intersectionality, and in doing so, acknowledges that implicit bias related to race and gender also plays a significant role in LRE determination (Crenshaw, 2017). Likewise, the researcher sought to understand the experience of certified educators regarding implicit bias related to ID and ED, which are two of the most statistically segregated disability categories in public education (Grindal et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

The researcher utilized a narrative inquiry methodology to explore the experiences of Connecticut's certified educators related to placement decisions of students with ID and ED, as well as the outcomes of implicit bias in student placements. The researcher holds certifications by the state of Connecticut, in three areas: general education, special education, and administration. The researcher's background and experience in education, is an important quality of conducting narrative inquiry research, in that the researcher can build rapport with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The researcher was also employed as a director of pupil services. All participants were assumed to be truthful in their responses. Additionally, it was presumed that some level of implicit bias, related to ability level (e.g., ableism), was present in all certified educators. Similarly, the researcher acknowledged that the presence of implicit

bias in the study's title could impact participant responses. The scope of this study was open to all persons who hold a Connecticut education certification for grades PreK-12 in general and/or special education. The researcher utilized Connecticut urban district websites to locate certified educators and invited any Connecticut-certified personnel to participate in the unstructured interview. Facebook teacher groups were also utilized, and with the permission of the group owner, the researcher posted recruitment materials for this study to the participating groups. The researcher chose to include special education teachers and general education teachers into the study, as they are mandated participants of the IEP team. The researcher intended to obtain a representative group of certified educators from different urban districts within Connecticut as well as a variety of tenures.

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut school educators' perceptions of student's capabilities in relation to ID and ED associated with the LRE. This study also sought to understand how certified educators' experiences with implicit bias relates to LRE. The participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to gather information on the experiences and perceptions of certified educators in implicit bias and LRE decisions/placement.

Rationale and Significance

Implicit bias is one of the most difficult areas to identify, as these acts are driven by unconscious thoughts (Brownstein, 2019). In addition, there is a hesitance among individuals to identify having thoughts that would imply racist behavior, favor one gender over the other, or think that special education students are not capable of the same expectations of their non-disabled peers (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2022). Furthermore, research related to special education labels and perceived ability levels has been conducted for decades (Budoff & Conant,

1971). In order to get a universal understanding, it is imperative that the research continues to explore and examine school personnel experiences post COVID-19 pandemic. Implicit bias is a sensitive and expansive topic, covering gender, race, and ability, known as intersectionality, in Connecticut and throughout the United States (Bagenstos, 2018). The existence of bias in the idea of least restrictive environment may help center conversations around the appropriate placement of students. It was essential to complete this research and share findings with Connecticut school districts because certified educators have a significant impact on student learning outcomes and IEP decisions, which are related to teacher's interpretations of student ability and achievement (Worrell, 2022).

Summary

The term LRE is not clearly defined by federal law. This leaves districts and educators to individually construct meaning (White et al., 2023). Additionally, the presence of implicit bias must be identified to assure that placement decisions related to LRE are solely focused on the needs of students, rather than the unconscious stereotypes of team members (Bolourian et al., 2018). The problem to be addressed is the need for a greater understanding of how the natural existence of implicit bias among certified educators impacts their view of student capabilities and achievement, thus impacting placement decisions in the classroom. The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators' perceptions of students' capabilities in relation to the ID and ED associated with LRE.

This study utilized the theoretical framework of implicit bias theory to identify implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators and examine its potential impact on students' placements in the least restrictive environment. The researcher anticipated identifying implicit bias related to special education labels, ability, gender, and race through the conceptual understanding that

implicit bias is inherent in all human beings (Woods, 2018). Individual implicit bias may best be understood through the lens of a distinct groups of participants (Chiu et al., 2022). The significance of having representatives from both general and special education certification, is to reflect the diverse experience of certified educators. Another significant aspect was to gain an understanding of the experience of such professionals in relation to special education labels, placement, implicit bias, and LRE. The researcher aimed to investigate the perceptions that existed between Connecticut educators and the determination of students' LRE. The researcher anticipated that implicit biases regarding ability, alongside other identifiers (e.g., race and gender) would be addressed in the discussion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) required school districts to provide education to students with disabilities. The law has been revised several times, including a 1990 revision, which changed the name to reflect societal norms: renaming the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The formalization of the least restrictive environment (LRE) concept accompanied this revision (Lim, 2020). The goal of this ideology was to provide special education students an education in the general education setting to the greatest extent appropriate (Bolourian et al., 2018). Regardless of its existence in federal law, there continues to be disagreement over LRE due, partially to terms (e.g., mainstream and inclusion), often utilized to help determine LRE are not part of federal law, and thus not defined by federal law (Underwood, 2018). LRE is discussed in many individualized education plan (IEP) placement meetings, but the meaning of LRE continues to be an area of debate, which creates an inconsistency in the implementation of LRE at each level: district, state, and the nation (Sauer & Johnson, 2016).

Several court cases delivered guidance regarding LRE, however; there remains a lack of consistency in the rulings. While *L.H. v. Hamilton County Department of Education* (2018) ruled that the district did not provide education in the student's LRE, Underwood (2018) pointed out that given the ambiguous nature of LRE, it is not certain that a different district court will rule in the same manner. Similarly, *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) ruled that placement in a general education setting is preferable to other options. The selection of ambiguous terminology perpetuates ongoing debates surrounding LRE.

Conversely, other cases provided widely applied guidance on LRE. Bolourian et al. (2018) described the two-part test utilized by districts to determine placement in general

education. This test was a result of *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* (1989). Similarly, *Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H* (1994) which resulted in a four-part test to determine LRE. Consideration of LRE entails districts assessing the educational benefit of the student in the general education setting with appropriate supports, the social benefits from time with non-disabled peers, the impact of students and teachers in the general education setting, and the cost of placement. Both *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* (1989) and *Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H* (1994) guide districts in LRE determination with tests which can be applied to placement determination. These assessments are determined at the district-level, rather than the federal level, leading to ambiguity (Kauffman et al., 2023; Reiner, 2018). Despite the guidelines on LRE, inconsistencies continue to be evident.

Discussions of LRE at IEP meetings are often centered around the student's least restrictive environment (Jackson et al., 2022). Specifically, the term *environment* has led to continued disagreement over the meaning of LRE. The debate is over the public perception of whether LRE is a place or services provided (Kauffman et al., 2021). Additional themes explored in research studies involve the impact of bias on determining LRE placement, resulting in the segregation of students with disabilities, and the argument that LRE has fostered the development of two distinct systems. One system is for general education and one system is for special education, which contradicts the initial goal of the federal law (Kroesch & Peeples, 2021).

The researcher of this present study explored studies related to the key areas of LRE as a place versus services, the two separate systems of education, and the existence of implicit bias in special education determination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher reviewed

studies published between 2020 and 2022, emphasizing academic journals and state statistics as primary sources. Although some research extends beyond this two-year period, the publications will be analyzed alongside current data and research. A combination of educational academic journals as well as Connecticut State Department of Education databases was reviewed as a part of this literature review. The literature in this chapter was synthesized by the researcher to provide guidance for the study and to ascertain the influence of implicit bias among certified educators on the determination of LRE for special education students specifically those with the educational labels of intellectual disability (ID) and emotional disability (ED).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this narrative inquiry study was implemented to identify the nature of implicit bias in certified educators. The dual concepts of the LRE and implicit bias continue to produce varied definitions throughout the field of education (Lim, 2020). Implicit bias theory will be used to seek the identification of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators. The researcher anticipated a clearer understanding of the experiences of Connecticut certified educators regarding implicit bias as it relates to special education labels, ability level, gender, and race. Discussions surrounding implicit bias became more prevalent in 2020 after a Connecticut law declared racism a public health crisis (*Public Act 21-35*, 2021). The law requires schools to reduce racial disparity in education by at least 70% (*Public Act 21-35*, 2021). Section 4 of this law required state institutions to evaluate existing racism as well as develop a strategic plan for improvement within the organizations (*Public Act 21-35*, 2021). Many districts created equity teams as part of the improvement plan and in response to concerns of racist acts within the school day (Mirror, 2022). The conversations around equity and implicit bias may be more

prevalent in US education, but those conversations often do not address implicit bias specific to ability (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2023).

Personal Interest

The researcher conducted this research after more than a decade of experience in Connecticut's public education system, as a general educator, special educator and administrator. The researcher was motivated to explore the experiences of Connecticut's certified educators related to student placement and implicit bias. The researcher was also motivated to explore the resources allocated to certified educators regarding professional development around implicit bias and student special education labels, particularly intellectual and emotional disabilities.

Topical Research

Woods (2018) emphasized the seriousness of implicit bias by noting its prevalence in all humans. The inherent unconscious nature of bias in all individuals complicates the assurance of unbiased decision-making. Woods' study focused specifically on the criminal justice system and the treatment of people in the African American community. Woods noted that because implicit bias theory stresses that all humans are unconsciously biased, any individual whose profession dictates the fate of another individual (e.g. judge, police officer, etc.) also possess unconscious biases that may impact decision-making. Implicit bias theory proposes that people need to be educated about their biases to help reduce the impact of those biases on marginalized communities (Woods, 2018).

The variables of this study are Connecticut certified educators and implicit bias. A literature review was conducted to explore the existence of implicit bias in certified educators, as well as the outcome of implicit bias in students' least restrictive environment. The researcher also recognized that while the focus of the study is on the existence of implicit bias towards

special education students, intersectionality is prevalent in implicit bias, and as such, race and gender will also be addressed (Crenshaw, 2017). Additionally, the researcher assumed the presence of ability-based bias in societies and implicit biases towards individuals with disabilities, particularly in schools catering to students with special needs education designations.

Implicit bias poses a challenge due to its unconscious nature. The deeply rooted biases of ability, gender, and race in societies, are linked to all individuals in every profession (Crenshaw, 2017). The experiences of implicit bias are different for every individual. In education, educators who are part of an underrepresented group, may exhibit reduced levels of implicit bias toward students of that same group (Denessen et al., 2022). According to Denessen et al. (2022), students from underrepresented groups who lack educators from their respective demographic receive fewer positive comments. It is difficult to assess the number of educators who had a special education label as a student; however, according to Denessen et al., not having experienced that label as a student would increase the educator's implicit bias toward special education students.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the theoretical framework of implicit bias theory to identify implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators and examine its potential impact on students' placements in the least restrictive environment. Implicit bias theory focuses on the unconscious reactions, based on stereotypes, towards groups who are often marginalized (Brownstein, 2019). Woods (2018) emphasized that implicit bias theory suggests all people exhibit unconscious bias. This research will employ implicit bias theory to specifically investigate implicit bias related to ability, diverging from the predominant focus of implicit bias research on underrepresented people and communities (e.g., African Americans) and marginalized groups (e.g., sexual and

gender minorities) (Crenshaw, 2017). The idea of intersectionality is present in all fields of study, and thus this dissertation will explore how other implicit biases (e.g., ability, gender, and race) possibly play a role in student LRE placement decision-making. According to Inan-Kaya et al. (2022), implicit bias is present in all classrooms. Furthermore, implicit bias may manifest in both non-verbal and verbal communication, encompassing factors such as the duration of academic dialogue initiated by teachers when interacting with students (Inan-Kaya et al., 2022). Based on this conclusion, the researcher formulated interview questions to explore the understanding and firsthand encounters of certified educators regarding the potential shortfall in communicative engagement with students.

The Challenge of Implicit Bias Theory

The unconscious nature of implicit bias theory presents a challenge, as it is difficult to identify or alter something unconsciously. Furthermore, acts of implicit bias are nearly impossible to bring disciplinary measures against, as an unconscious act implies no intentional harm (Masakayan, 2017). Decisions are occasionally made that reflect a bias, even when the professionals are unaware of it. Clark et al. (2020) found that health professionals reported an unconscious bias in recommendations that were reflective of their personal diet preferences. Another challenge arises from individuals' reluctance to acknowledge personal biases (Crenshaw, 2017). Additionally, those who are more conscious of bias, are more likely to show awareness of bias (Perry et al., 2015). The researcher intended to understand the experience of certified educators in addition to their exposure to implicit bias training. Perry et al. (2015) found that individuals who are aware of their own biases have a higher likelihood of recognizing and understanding the biases of others. The researcher expected participants to demonstrate varying levels of awareness regarding the bias of others, as well as their own personal bias.

Least Restrictive Environment and the Creation of Two Systems

Research teams have contended that the implementation of LRE has resulted in the establishment of two separate educational systems: one for general education and another for special education. (Kroesch & Peeples, 2021; Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Part of the reason two systems of education exist is related to the lack of clear language used in federal legislation. According to Sauer and Jorgensen (2016), if IDEA (2004) had used the explicit language used in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which forbade separate areas of education and denounced its inequity, when referencing services and placements related to LRE, fewer due process cases surrounding LRE would exist. Districts with less inclusive programming also face higher incidences of due process hearings (White et al., 2023). Furthermore, only students with advocates or parents who have challenged districts via due process or other litigation have benefited from a review of LRE, potentially creating a system in which only a few students may exercise their rights (Carney, 2021). Bolourian et al. (2018) found that fewer than 15% of due process cases were submitted by English language learner (ELL) parents. This raises concerns about how IDEA rights are being presented to parents of ELL students (Bolourian, 2018). Such findings further highlight inequities. Ultimately, the ambiguous nature of LRE has created two separate systems, which create a further divide in societal injustices (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016).

Due process cases related to LREs are often individualized, which benefits a particular student, but does not change the entire system (Carney, 2021). *L.H. v. Hamilton County Department of Education* (2018) served as a victory for student L.H., as the circuit court ruled that the district had violated his LRE in placing him in a self-contained classroom. The court's opinion established a precedent stating that students are not required to demonstrate mastery of the general education curriculum to receive education in the general education classroom.

However, this created a continued ambiguity in conjunction with parents that may not have the resources to advocate for their child's inclusion, or face cultural bias themselves, leading to an inequity, in that not all children benefit from this ruling (Rios & Aleman, 2023). Those who benefit from due process wins are often privileged to have parental advocates or access to educational attorneys (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016).

The two systems of education have become so segregated that the very skill sets of general and special educators have become greatly polarized and may not allow for the possibility of one uniform system; the rationale for IDEA (Graham et al., 2023). The separation of general and special education systems impacts the ability of schools to challenge and change general education practices (Bahr et al., 2023). Tzucker (2022) noted the lack of skill sets to manage disruptive behaviors impacts all students in the classroom. The lack of skills needed to manage disruptive behavior impacts educational time lost, but also the amount of time spent in a general education class (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Wehmeyer et al. (2021) found that general education training for specific disabilities is not consistent with special education resources, particularly for significant support needs, which led to clustered, segregated programming. Most general education teachers lack the skill sets for working with specific groups of students with disabilities in an inclusive setting (Bahr et al., 2023). Misunderstanding the comprehension and application of LRE by general and special educators may lead to the segregation of students with disabilities. Home et al. (2019) found that both general and special education teachers lack comprehensive knowledge of special education law, including LRE, and thus are unable to apply such law to personal practice.

Two of the most referenced disability categories to be segregated from general education are ED and ID (Grindal et al., 2019). The stark contrast in segregated programming is blatant in

research regarding alternative schools. One could argue that mere existence of alternative schools constitutes a violation of 1975 EAHCA and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), as students placed in these settings are segregated by lacking opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers. In addition to the physical separation from non-disabled peers, students in alternative schools also receive an inferior education (Grindal et al., 2019). One reason for the removal and overtly segregated alternative schools lies in the research that reveals a lack of educational skills in working with students with ED among general education teachers (McKenna et al., 2022). Students with ID are more likely to be educated in segregated, self-contained settings (McCabe et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al. 2021). Students with ID in such segregated placements are often taught with a modified curriculum, which implies, stereotypically, that there are limits to the access of a general education curriculum (Hanreddy & Östlund, 2020). The segregation of students in self-contained classrooms results in lower graduation and post-secondary employment rates (Grindal et al., 2016).

General education teachers' skill deficits are not limited to working with students with emotional disturbances (ED). Instead, the deficits pertain to collaborative efforts to provide inclusive education to all students with disabilities. Politou (2022) discovered that special education teachers were more inclined to support the full inclusion of students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in general education settings compared to general education teachers. However, general education teachers expressed concerns about full inclusion due to inadequate training in special education (Politou, 2022). Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) argued that the existence of separate systems enhances the stereotypes and assumptions of the capabilities of students with disabilities. The research team utilized a Georgia case study in

which the team determined that general educators were not provided training to support inclusive classrooms, thus students were placed in segregated settings (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016).

A lack of training for general educators is a leading contributor to a reduction of inclusive classrooms. Kroesch and Peeples (2021) study found that 87.7% of general education teachers disagreed that they collaborate with related service providers. Additionally, 83.3% also disagreed that they collaborated with paraprofessionals, and 71.1% did not feel capable of working with students with severe disabilities in their general education classroom. Seventy-seven percent did not think they were capable of differentiating for students with severe disabilities (Kroesch & Peeples, 2021). Tzucker's (2022) analysis recommendation calls on the federal government to provide funding for additional training of general education teachers, so they may acquire the skill sets to effectively manage students with disabilities enrolled in general education classrooms.

Mitigating the Educational Disparities

Some practices have been initiated to counteract the segregation of special education students because of individualized cases. In Connecticut, *P.J. et al. v. State of Connecticut, Board of Education* (2002) led to a state initiative to increase time with non-disabled peers for students with ID. This case led to the Connecticut State Department of Education's development of specific guidelines for determining LRE and an emphasis on accountability through compliance monitoring (Connecticut Department of Education, 2017). Similarly, on the national level, the United States Department of Education's School-Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) project has been implemented at select schools to increase inclusive settings and combat segregation between general and special education. The goal of the SWIFT project is to increase equitable and inclusive practices by providing academic and behavioral

supports in inclusive settings, often referred to as multi-tiered systems of supports (University of Kentucky, 2016). However, Kauffman et al. (2021) argued that significant progress of the SWIFT project is nearly impossible unless societal biases are completely eradicated. Biases impact the ability to truly reduce the separation of special education and general education (Bahr et al., 2018).

Research finds that segregation in education is harmful to all students (e.g., with or without a disability) and teachers. Bolourian et al. (2018) concluded that when placed appropriately, there are benefits to all students as well as teachers, including an impact on teachers' confidence. Additionally, there is evidence of the positive outcomes of inclusive education for all parties involved (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Such outcomes include improved social skills, increased engagement, social relationships, higher expectations, higher scores on academic tests, and better post-secondary outcomes (Jones & Winters, 2023). Particularly, students with disabilities placed in an inclusive environment outperform students with disabilities placed in a segregated program (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Hence, the advantages of inclusion surpass any disadvantages.

The positive outcomes of inclusion are further supported by the negative effects of segregation. Students placed in environments with a higher percentage of special education students demonstrate more behavioral episodes, less instances of self-regulation, and poorer interpersonal skills (Gottfried, 2014). Wehmeyer et al. (2021) presented findings of segregated students with ID, including a lack of effective instruction and numerous activities unrelated to the curriculum, noting a lack of rigor in the classrooms. Segregated settings result in limited experiences, limited access to grade-level work, and negative long-term effects (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

The Dual Concepts of the Least Restrictive Environment

The intent of IDEA is to have least restrictive environment (LRE) viewed as a service or services, not as a place (Giangreco, 2020; Kauffman et al., 2021). The significance of this distinction is crucial because, without it, teams tend to prioritize physical settings rather than instructional standards. According to Sauer and Jorgensen (2016), teams will focus on a place, as there is a misconception that more intensive services come with a more restrictive environment. Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) found that districts informed parents that the services needed for their children are found in the more restrictive environments. This may be in part because IEP teams have come to adopt the notion that more intensive services are found in more restrictive settings (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016).

McCabe et al. (2020) conducted a study that determined there are two schools of thought surrounding the understanding of LRE. One perspective regards LRE as a physical location, whereas the alternative perspective perceives LRE as a set of services. McCabe et al. agree with Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) and Kauffman et al. (2021) that LRE is not a specific location, but rather the services that are implemented to educate students with disabilities. McCabe et al. used a quantitative methodology to review several IEPs to analyze LRE statements. The review revealed that in many instances, a student's need for specialized instruction was used to justify a change in placement; however, specialized instruction is more likely to occur in general education settings than in segregated, alternative programs (McCabe et al., 2020). Students were moved from inclusion because of the idea that intensive services occur in a location (e.g., resource rooms or self-contained classrooms) (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). *Oberti v. Board of Education of Borough of Clementon School District* (1993) ruled that schools must not put a child in a more restrictive environment because the teacher does not know how to teach him and

that "inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few" (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016, p. 62). McCabe et al. recommended that IEP teams create requirements for schools to meet before changing a student's placement, rather than creating conditions for a student to achieve to stay in a placement, thus encouraging the focus on the implementation of services rather than a change of location.

Overall, the debate regarding LRE as a place versus services is in part due to the inconsistent teacher training programs across the United States (Giangreco, 2020). Teacher training is different from state to state concerning specialized instruction. The state of Connecticut requires teacher candidates to specialize in a specific disability category, other states lack this requirement (Wehmeyer et al., 2020). Furthermore, skill set deficits between general and special education teachers drive discussions surrounding LRE towards a focus on place rather than the implementation of services. Additionally, there are inconsistencies within states. Districts devise their continuum, which has resulted in clusters of specialized services in specific programs (Reiner, 2018). The vast differences in the continuum of services mean that students who transfer from one district to another may potentially have a different placement. Finally, Giangreco (2020) also notes an inequity of segregation that is present among disability labels, emphasizing the notion that far too often labels are used to determine placement.

Implicit Bias and LRE

It is important to note a gap in research regarding the study of implicit bias specific to its existence among certified educators and its impact on the educational experience of students. According to DeCuir-Gunby and Bindra (2022), the limits in current research are to some extent due to the inherent difficulties of identifying implicit bias. Much of the research conducted with educators utilize the Implicit Attitudes Test (IAT) as well as participant interviews, to determine

the existence of implicit bias among educators (Townsend, 2022). Therefore, the role of implicit bias in the LRE decision-making process of educators is critical. The three implicit biases explored in this literature review, related to LRE are ability, but also race, and gender. DeCuir-Gunby and Bindra (2022) emphasized the ingrained bias related to intelligence, which impacts discussions surrounding LRE. Implicit bias is present at all levels of education and may influence student's personal perceptions of intelligence, aptitude, abilities (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2022; Gullo et al., 2019). According to Argan et al. (2019), one of the six determinants of placement includes bias. McCabe et al. (2020) and Wehmeyer et al. (2021) noted that bias lies in personnel training, allocation of funds and resources, school climate, and teacher/administrator training and attitudes each of which impact LRE placement decisions. Politou's (2022) quantitative study asked general education teachers to complete a survey regarding the inclusion of students with ADHD in the general education setting. A higher number of general education teachers expressed disagreement regarding the student's placement in the general education setting as the questions necessitated more classroom supports (e.g., communication devices or accommodations) (Politou, 2022). Because of its prevalence in society, it is expected that implicit bias is present in IEP team discussions (e.g., test scores) combined with an individual's implicit biases may impact placement decisions (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The biases of a few individuals may impact placement. Some teams rely on the reports and analysis of a school psychologist to guide placement; thus, in some cases, individual biases may drive placement decisions (Bolourian et al., 2018).

The skill set deficits among general education teachers impact inclusion practices (Bahr et al., 2023). Although special educators have diverse training, implicit bias lies within everyone, including special education teachers. Kroesch and Peebles (2021) referenced the Agran et al.

(2002) study, in which the team concluded that after surveying special education teachers, most believed that special education students with severe disabilities should not be placed in an inclusive environment. Additionally, across multiple states, students with disabilities have historically scored lower on standardized assessments (Sireci et al., 2005). This prior knowledge may contribute to educator biases towards students with special education labels and an unconscious correlation related to student ability (Pak & Parsons, 2022).

Biases related to ability, race, and gender have resulted in inequities in the form of overrepresentation of students with specific disability categories, male students of color, students of color, and students from low-income areas (Cooc, 2022; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Morgan (2020) noted that one of the leading causes of the overidentification of students of color is “inaccurate teacher perceptions” (p.72). The magnitude of such overidentification of non-White students is detrimental to the student’s future. There is a statistical relationship between special education labels and increased presence in the criminal justice system as well as higher unemployment rates (Voulgarides, 2022).

The presence of bias among educators is evidenced by a greater representation of students in ID and students of color in non-inclusive settings (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA attempted to create mandates for districts to decrease the racial inequities in special education. Districts were notified if they had significant disproportionality related to higher special education identification labels for students of color. However, districts were able to maintain compliance with few changes, while still reporting significant disparities (Voulgarides, 2022).

The placement patterns of students based on race and gender show an inequity, which is likely related to biases within the IEP team (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). The United States has a

history of lawsuits related to bias in standardized tests, as well as overidentification of students of color with labels of ID, resulting in LRE determinations that place the student in a segregated program, with an inferior quality of education (Marsico, 2021). Similar to the theme of two separate education systems creating an added segregation, the biases of educators towards specific disability labels, age and race impact placement decisions (Cooc, 2022). The disproportionality of students of color with disabilities as segregated from their non-disabled peers, increases as the students age (Cooc, 2022). Similarly, McCabe et al. (2020) noted that biases related to the ability of students have impacted placement decisions. Students with ID are also impacted by the biases of their IEP team. Many people believe ID students require highly specialized instruction, which impacts placement decisions (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The United States Department of Education statistics support the findings in McCabe et al. (2020) and (Wehmeyer et al. (2021). The United States Department of Education 2017 data revealed that only 16.5% of ID students spend 80% or more of their day in a general education setting, as compared to 62.7% of all students with disabilities (McCabe et al., 2020). The United States Department of Education's 2020 data reveals 17.9% of students with ID spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2022). Students with ID or multiple disabilities spend the least amount of time in a general education setting, and when placed there, do not spend time in academic classes (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The continuum of services within the framework of LRE has led to a system that discriminates against certain disabilities. Students with ID may not be able to demonstrate specific academic growth and thus may not be able to transfer to a less restrictive placement.

Implicit bias related to racism, in addition to ableism, affects the identification and subsequent educational placement of students of color (Morgan, 2020). Some teacher-education

programs have modified critical race theory to also include bias toward disability. Critical race theory examines systemic racism within the legal and education systems of the US, as a primary cause for historic and continued inequity and injustice (Kaerwer & Pritchett, 2023). The programs employ an integrated approach of disability and critical race theory [or theories], urging educators to examine how implicit racism might influence assumptions about individuals' abilities. (Chiu et al., 2022). This integrated theoretical framework not only highlights the interplay between racism and ableism but also underscores the urgent need for educational systems to cultivate awareness and actively dismantle the biases that hinder equitable education for all students.

Across the United States, there is a disproportionately higher percentage of students of color living in poverty. Implications of poverty frequently lead to an overidentification of special education labels (Marsico, 2021). The most crucial area affected by implicit racial bias is the overidentification of African American male students, which manifests in the disproportionate labeling of these students for special education services and subsequent placement in specific programs (Chiu et al., 2022). Overrepresentation of race and gender in special education programs with zero percent times with non-disabled peers is a concern of segregation. Furthermore, racial bias impacts identification and placement, in that standardized assessments are culturally biased (Marsico, 2021). Additionally, some assessments allow for subjective or observation implications, which do not exclude racial bias (Morgan, 2020). The duality of overidentification and label-specific segregation among special education programs impacts male students of color the most (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

Summary

The research teams cited throughout this literature review experienced minimal academic

discourse in their findings. The only clear disagreement lies between Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) and Kauffman et al. (2021) regarding the effectiveness of the U.S. Department of Education's implementation of the SWIFT Program. For the most part, the several research teams mentioned throughout this literature review agree that LRE is a series of services, not a place. The teams also agree that LRE has done significant damage to our educational system, in that it has justified the creation of two separate systems of education - general education and special education – (Kauffman et al., 2021; Sauer & Jorgensen 2016). The divide has increased the segregation of students with disabilities, particularly those with ED and ID. The teams also agree that educators' implicit bias may impact the placement of students into more restrictive environments based on the false notion that individualized and specialized services are available in more restrictive environments. Therefore, while the research teams tend to present findings that align with similar arguments, there still lies discourse among school districts, advocates, and families regarding LRE.

As society in the United States continues to evolve, the field of education must consistently adapt and improve to align with these changes. Nonetheless, a significant factor that profoundly affects the education system is the presence of institutionalized bias among teachers, which has a direct impact on students (Agran et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut school educators' perceptions of student's capabilities in relation to ID and ED associated with the LRE. Such biases (e.g. ability, race, gender) serve as an obstacle to students with disabilities in the goal to have access to general education for the greatest amount of their school day (Morgan et al., 2023). This study aimed to uncover existing biases regarding students with disabilities and explore how these biases influence student placement in more restrictive settings. Addressing these biases is crucial

for ensuring that all students, especially those with disabilities, receive equitable educational opportunities and are empowered to succeed in the least restrictive environments possible.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study employed the theory of implicit bias to explore and observe the experiences of certified educators and their unconscious biases on the placement of special education students. The study acknowledged that educators need continual training on implicit bias to help recognize their inherent discrimination and reduce the impact of professional decision-making on populations (Woods, 2018). This study assessed the extent to which educators are being trained on implicit bias. The challenge lies in acknowledging and mitigating implicit bias, which operates on an unconscious level and is deeply ingrained within societies. Intersectionality refers to the combined effects of implicit biases that exist across gender, race, and perceived ability in American society and worldwide (Crenshaw, 2017). Implicit bias, therefore, is present in the realm of education and, as this researcher sought to understand, may impact the least restrictive environment (LRE) decisions or the removal of students from the general education setting. The topics of race, gender, and ability related to implicit bias, are experienced on an individual basis, which is the reason the researcher opted for a narrative inquiry methodology (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017).

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore implicit bias among Connecticut's certified educators as well as the outcomes of implicit bias on student placement. The study explored school-certified personnel perceptions of students with special education labels in relation to their abilities to participate in the general education environment. Dissemination of the findings to educators and stakeholders followed the study, with the aim of raising awareness about the importance of implementing or maintaining training programs focused on identifying implicit bias. This is especially relevant for IEP teams, which comprise general education and special education teachers.

To guide this study, the researcher developed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What actions do Connecticut certified educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

Research Question 2: What barriers do Connecticut certified educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement least restrictive environment?

Research Question 3: What professional development experiences have informed Connecticut's certified educators ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

The researcher gained a deeper understanding of the experiences of certified educators regarding three key areas: implicit bias, the determination of LRE for special education students, and the level of participation in the general education curriculum. The objective was to explore and examine these topics to enhance comprehension of the perspectives and encounters of school personnel. Implicit bias is present in all fields of study, and is a phenomenon experienced by certified educators; however, it is difficult to identify because it manifests on many levels (Agarwal, 2018). Conversation and dialogue with the researcher allowed the researcher to determine the degree to which educators can recognize and/or understand their own implicit bias. Narrative inquiry encouraged the participant to engage in the reflective process, examining one's own perceptions and experience (Jeong-Hee, 2016).

The selection of the narrative inquiry methodology by the researcher stemmed from the recognition that numbers may not adequately capture individualized experiences, nor "reveal deep understandings about human interaction" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 16). Furthermore, the researcher was able to determine how those biases impact LRE determination. A narrative

inquiry methodology was selected to answer the research questions of this study. The researcher used a representative sample from urban school districts in the state of Connecticut. The intent was to examine the presence of implicit bias in urban settings. According to CT.gov., 2023, the nature of implicit bias in urban environments is characterized by a larger proportion of students in special education and higher student-to-staff ratios, despite a relatively lower percentage of expenditure on special education. Furthermore, the narrative inquiry method has been used in research in the field of education with the belief that the retelling of lived experiences will encourage further analysis and research and improve teacher education programming (Jeong-Hee Kim, 2016). This chapter provides an overview of the study's demographics, participants, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, ethical issues, and trustworthiness.

Site Information and Demographics/Setting

This study was conducted through interviews, using narrative inquiry. General and special education teachers currently employed by an urban district within Connecticut were asked to volunteer as participants. These certified educators in urban school districts in Connecticut were contacted by the researcher. Urban areas were selected because high populations of special education students and student-to-staff ratios were prevalent (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022). The researcher assumed the likelihood of IEP meetings related to the LRE were higher among districts with higher special education populations, as well as a higher student-to-staff ratios. Urban school districts also have a higher ratio of students who are labeled as being emotionally and intellectually disabled. Students with these labels are among the most segregated from their general education peers (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

The researcher utilized district websites to email general and special education teachers in

each district. Secondary recruitment involved posting the recruitment email and participant information sheet on select Facebook groups. Approval was obtained after contacting administrators of teacher Facebook groups, allowing the researcher to recruit participants. Subsequently, participants were contacted via email and invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Upon approval of the posting, the researcher successfully recruited participants. The researcher obtained eight volunteers to participate in the study. There is no set number for participants in qualitative research; however, a narrative inquiry methodology is best conducted using a small number of participants (Subedi, 2021). Due to the nature of the narrative inquiry, the length of the interview process, as well as the researcher's participation, a smaller sample size is supported (Subedi, 2021). The researcher selected a relatively small sample size with the intention of building a rapport with the participants, referred to as a relational perspective (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Moreover, the study included an equitable range of general and special education teachers.

Interviews were offered via Zoom Video Communications (Zoom), as it allowed for the most flexibility in schedules and eliminated the need for additional travel, while also having high incidents of success across qualitative studies (Boland et al., 2022). The Zoom platform also allowed for sessions to be recorded and transcribed, with participant permission. The researcher cross-referenced the audio recording on Zoom with the transcription, to assure accuracy in transcription. A second step, taken by the researcher, to validate the transcriptions was to allow participants the opportunity to verify the Zoom recordings. This meticulous approach not only enhanced the reliability of the data but also ensured that the participants' perspectives were accurately and respectfully captured.

Participants and Sampling Method

The researcher engaged with eight participants for the study, and was able to establish a strong connection and adopt a relational perspective (Hayden & van der Riet, 2017) while conducting the narrative inquiry. Due to the utilization of a relatively homogeneous population (e.g., certified educators) in this study, the researcher conducted a limited number of interviews, yet was still able to achieve data saturation (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). All participants held an active Connecticut educator certificate and were employed by an urban school district, as noted in the previous section. The goal of the researcher was to have as close to an even split between general and special education certified participants. The rationale behind this drive for equal representation is to assess the existence of implicit bias in LRE determination among different members of the service and IEP team.

There are two crucial reasons why having a diverse sample of participants holds significant importance. First, it is important to select individuals who are representative of the IEP process, including the teachers that are involved and responsible for implementing the IEP. The researcher's objective in aiming to secure an equal representation of general and special educators is to establish a sample that accurately represents the diverse range of professionals involved (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Second, the researcher analyzed the phenomenon of implicit bias as it relates to Connecticut educators working with students in LREs. Prior to conducting the interviews, the participants received informed consent documents, which they reviewed and signed, in order to express agreement to participate in the study. Informed consent included a brief questionnaire for participants to complete, noting their qualifications to meet the minimum requirements of this study: agreement to record the interview session, at least one year of service, and Connecticut special education certification and/or general education certification.

All of the materials mentioned above are included in Appendix A.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

All participants were individually asked the same guided interview questions, which were created from the three research questions that shaped this study. Zoom was the preferred platform, as it allowed for recording and transcription. Agreement to record was required to participate in this study, as it assured an additional method of accuracy. Transcription accuracy was ensured as the researcher personally reviewed the recorded transcripts. This step was necessary because automated transcripts may not always accurately reflect the participant's speech or accent (Point & Baruch, 2023). Participants who actively engaged and consented to recording were selected to take part in the study, as transcripts were necessary for qualitative analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2017). The transcripts were analyzed from the temporal, social, and spatial perspectives (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). In other words, the researcher examined the narratives in terms of how time, environment, and societal influence have shaped their impact. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, participants were notified about the recording agreement at the outset of the solicitation process.

Participants were offered the opportunity to participate in this study at a variety of times, to ensure they were able to find a private space. Participants were kept anonymous. Steps to keep the anonymity of participants included utilizing the de-identification process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2016). Following the initial solicitation process, the researcher requested a meeting with participants, respectively. During this meeting, the researcher elaborated on the study's purpose, presented a confidentiality agreement, and consent form for recording.

Data Analysis

The researcher developed interview questions based on the three research questions that

guide this study. The questions served as a guide to encourage conversation, for an in-depth account of the participant's experiences. Narrative inquiry facilitates the co-construction of the researcher's own encounters with LRE and implicit bias, alongside the experiences of the participants, in order to establish a strong rapport (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). The researcher used temporal, social, and spatial perspectives to analyze the interview transcripts (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Initially, the researcher examined instances of effective actions taken to address implicit bias from a temporal standpoint. The researcher aimed to investigate the experiences associated with efforts made to address implicit bias, with a specific emphasis on examining changes that occur over time. Next, the use of a spatial societal perspective, allowed the researcher to review participants' experiences with barriers for student access to general education environment. Then, the researcher adapted a temporal perspective in analyzing the experiences of participants in professional development regarding implicit bias and LRE. The researcher reviewed the transcripts to identify any similarities or differences related to participant's implementation of LRE for students with disabilities. Finally, the researcher explored statements pertaining to the integration of student profiles within a general education classroom, as one of the examples.

Limitations, Delimitations, Ethical Issues

The researcher carefully evaluated the research design, particularly focusing on the methodology. Ethical considerations, particularly those aligned with the principles outlined in the Belmont Report are also discussed. Reflection on the limitations reveals the researcher's acknowledgement of the potential impact of sample size constraints and any biases that may have influenced the findings. Furthermore, recommendations for future research avenues are proposed to address these limitations and advance the understanding of the topic.

Limitations

The limitations of this study revolve around the methodology. There are many strengths to the narrative inquiry methodology, especially in the field of education. There is a particular emphasis on the use of narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of teachers and how such experiences shape their profession (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, it should be noted that the process of conducting narrative inquiry methodology interviews is time-consuming, resulting in a limited number of participants in these studies (Bell, 2002).

The limitations of this study include the timing of recruitment. The researcher had initially planned to recruit certified educators during the summer break when a large portion of certified educators are not actively working. The researcher solicited recruitment and conducted interviews during the school year, potentially narrowing the pool of participants.

Delimitations

The researcher has over a decade of experience in education as a general education teacher, special education teacher, and special education administrator. This experience lends to a strength of narrative research in that the researcher understands the lived professional experiences of the participants (Clandinin, 2007). Additionally, certified educators in Connecticut work either a 10-month or 12-month calendar year, which limited the amount of time dedicated to the study. The researcher anticipated that most certified educators who were willing to participate would do so during the two-month period they are on school break.

Ethical Issues

The researcher's personal bias presents a noteworthy ethical consideration. However, the researcher selected a narrative inquiry methodology for the justification that it is difficult to eradicate one's own biases. This methodology allowed the researcher to share experiences

related to implicit bias regarding student ability and LRE (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). A limitation of this methodology included the ethical issue that the researcher provided the participants with the purpose of the study. By providing this information, ethically, the researcher already alluded to the researcher's goal of identifying implicit bias. This may have allowed participants to identify personal implicit biases, whereas, without such notice, participants would have been less likely to do so.

The researcher reviewed the 1974 Belmont Report, to ensure the study considered the safety of the participants. The Belmont Report provided guidance to the researcher to outline an approach that consisted of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participants signed a participant informed consent form, Appendix A, which includes a statement that assures anonymity. The consent form also included an overview of the study, including study procedures, the time required of participants, how the researcher planned to use the data/results, benefits to the field of education, and, as stated previously, the steps the researcher took to assure the anonymity of participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Regarding respect of persons, the participants in this study volunteered their participation. The recruitment materials for this study are included as part of Appendix B.

Anonymity was further assured by the process of deidentification to disconnect any ties to a specific school or individual, (Qualitative Data Repository, 2021). The process of deidentification also helped assure beneficence. It assured that participants felt safe throughout the process and that their identities had the greatest anonymity possible. Additionally, to assure participants that their identities were kept confidential, the researcher utilized a password-protected laptop. After any paper copies with identifying information were scanned into an electronic file, the paper copies were shredded. Mitigating one's own biases is always

challenging. The researcher enlisted the assistance of three colleagues, one specializing in special education and two in general education, to review the study's interview questions and drafts of dissertation chapters. This collaborative effort aimed to fully identify and mitigate individual biases.

The final guidance provided by the Belmont Report is related to justice. This guidance assures that justice is enacted throughout the study. The researcher utilized the same interview protocol, Appendix C, for each participant. Each participant was offered the opportunity to participate in the member-checking process. Lastly, each of the interviews were analyzed using the same narrative process, as outlined by Clandinin (2007).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the interview transcripts was defended by the transcripts, and automated by Zoom Video Communication platform (Boland et al., 2022). The actual recordings were not provided as a part of the dissertation, as they contain identifying information. If the participant included any identifying information (e.g., personal name or school/work name) the researcher blocked it out and noted that in the transcript (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). De-identification was an important part of this process because it allows the participants to fully engage in the process with the assurance that their identity is kept confidential to the greatest extent possible (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Credibility

The credibility of this study began with the alignment of the problem and purpose statements to guide research questions (Creswell, 2019). The researcher also took steps to select an appropriate methodology of study. Narrative inquiry was selected based on the problem and purpose statements, as well as an emphasis on the researcher's intent to study the human

experience (Clandinin, 2007). Clandinin (2007) reported that narrative inquiry is an ideal methodology for studying the human experience because quantitative methodologies “impose a limit on the ways in which participants in the research can present what they know or understand” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 20). The researcher assured that re-storied narratives were accurate. Accuracy was assured by the researcher’s offer to participants to read their re-storied narratives, through the process of member checking, which further assured credibility (Flick, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher provided the opportunity for the participants to individually review the re-storied narratives with the researcher to eradicate potential feelings of embarrassment or shame (Motulsky, 2021). The steps were meticulously executed to uphold the study’s credibility.

Transferability

The method of data collection, as well as the questions asked, should be transferable to any researcher who would like to conduct this study in urban school districts in different states within the United States (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Issues including the ambiguity of the least restrictive environment as well as the creation of two different systems of education (i.e., special and general), are federal issues and not isolated to the state of Connecticut. Thus, the information gathered as a part of this study should be utilized in other districts throughout the US. Due to the worldwide similarities regarding implicit bias, noted in the literature review, there may even be transferability to other countries (Hanreddy & Östlund, 2020; Øen & Johan Krumsvik, 2022).

Validity

The same questions were given to each participant in this study. Participants were solicited through an email or Facebook request. Participation was voluntary. Participants signed

an informed consent and had the opportunity to member check to ensure accuracy. Narrative inquiry considers the participant's tone, language choice, and gestures (Clandinin, 2007). This allows for the researcher to consider "the consistency of expression of the nuances of language that suggest integrity" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 21). Clandinin (2007) asserts that the narrative inquiry methodology enables researchers to move beyond the confines or rigidity of numerical data. Utilizing this methodological approach ensures a rich, holistic understanding of the participant experiences, thereby providing deeper insights into the phenomena under study.

Member Checking

Following the researcher's thorough review of the transcription for accuracy, which encompassed both the examination of the recording and personal notes, the transcripts were returned to the participants for their feedback. This process involved incorporating additions, deletions, and other necessary edits (Motulsky, 2021). This step of the process increased the probability that the transcripts were reflective of the participant's intended responses while eradicating any of the researcher's implied bias (Motulsky, 2021). This process, known as member checking, strengthened the trustworthiness of this research. Motulsky (2021) examined research indicating that member checking, specifically the re-examination of interview transcripts, may have adverse effects on participants, particularly when discussing sensitive or personal topics. The researcher provided the opportunity to participants to review the transcript in an appointment with the researcher.

Summary

This narrative inquiry study utilized interviews to collect qualitative data which helped to analyze the extent to which implicit bias impacts Connecticut certified educators understanding of LRE as well as the extent of ID and ED student participation or non-participation in general

education settings. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for free-flowing dialogue to capture the human experience. A group of eight participants were selected based on research conducted in the field of education, which also utilized a narrative inquiry approach (Chiu et al., 2022; Coleman, 2023; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The researcher informed participants of the process, as well as their right to confidentiality through de-identification and member checking. Systemic efforts were taken to ensure that collected data were valid, transferable, and credible so that this research can be utilized to inform school districts, as well as drive future research in this field. A narrative inquiry methodology was selected because of its uniqueness in allowing the researcher to explore the perceptions and experiences of participants through language, gestures, and tone (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Data was gathered and examined to assess the narrative of certified educators and their determination of LRE.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut school educators' perceptions of student's capabilities in relation to intellectual disabilities (ID) and emotional disabilities (ED) associated with the least restrictive environment (LRE). By delving into these questions, the study sought to illuminate the nuanced intersections between implicit bias and the placement of students with disabilities, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education practices. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What actions do Connecticut certified educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

Research Question 2: What barriers do Connecticut certified educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement least restrictive environment?

Research Question 3: What professional development experiences have informed Connecticut's certified educators ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

The researcher developed semi-structured interview questions based on the research questions. Selecting a narrative inquiry methodology was crucial for understanding the experiences of individuals in the field of education, as highlighted by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). The researcher chose a narrative inquiry methodology, believing that numerical data might not capture the nuances of individual experiences or uncover profound insights into human interaction, as Clandinin (2007) suggests. Furthermore, the researcher was able to determine how biases impact LRE determination. Following the completion of all eight interviews, the

transcripts were each re-storied. The researcher used temporal, social, and spatial perspectives to analyze the interview transcripts (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Initially, the researcher examined instances of effective actions taken to address implicit bias from a temporal standpoint.

The researcher aimed to investigate the experiences associated with efforts made to address implicit bias, with a specific emphasis on examining changes that occur over time. Next, the use of a societal perspective, allowed the researcher to review participants' experiences with barriers to student access to the general education environment. Then, the researcher adopted a spatial perspective in analyzing the experiences of participants in professional development regarding implicit bias and LRE. Common themes within the participants' stories emerged as part of the re-storying process. Three identified themes emerged from the eight participants and include: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (b) lack of guidance and training related to the LRE, and (c) lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias.

Analysis Method

Recruitment of participants was conducted by utilizing public school district websites to access special and general education teachers' email addresses, as well as private teacher Facebook groups. Eligibility for the study required participants to be employed by an urban school district in Connecticut and hold a certification as either a preK-12 special or general education teacher. The Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) was included as an attachment to the email and Facebook post. Identical recruitment statements (see Appendix B) were posted in the email solicitation as well as the Facebook group posts. The recruitment process spanned two and a half months, equivalent to 67 days. Six participants were recruited via email. Fifty-one days into the recruitment process, the researcher submitted an amendment to IRB to include private Facebook teacher groups to recruit two additional participants. Following

IRB approval of the amendment, the researcher successfully recruited the final two participants through private Facebook groups. Each response to the recruitment email and Facebook posts prompted the researcher to reply within 48 hours to schedule a suitable interview time.

Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via the Zoom Platform. The researcher had initially planned for 45-minute interviews. One interview was shorter than the anticipated time, at 35 minutes, while the others were between 50 minutes and an hour and 10 minutes.

The researcher re-read the verified transcripts and interview observation notes to become immersed in the data. The video recordings were deleted from the password-protected laptop following this process. Then, the researcher re-storied the data to organize individual stories. The stories were organized into three categories: (a) work with special education students, (b) experience with inclusion, and (c) professional development.

Participants were alerted via email of their opportunity to review the re-storied narratives for anonymity and accuracy, referred to as member checking. They were allotted 5 days to respond to this opportunity, with the understanding that failure to do so within the timeframe would imply acceptance of the narrative by the researcher. Specifically, participants were notified that failure to respond within the designated timeframe would be interpreted as acceptance of their narratives. Two participants responded but did not request any changes.

Member checking completion ensured accuracy, allowing the researcher to manually code each interview to identify common trends and link them to emerging themes. Different colors were employed to designate various ideas, with similar ideas highlighted in the same color. Following completion of this task, the researcher employed a color-coded Microsoft™ Excel document to organize trends and themes. The researcher determined the following themes: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (b) lack of guidance and training related to

LRE, and (c) lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias. The researcher then analyzed the re-storied narratives from the temporal, social, and spatial perspectives (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Consequently, the researcher examined the narratives in terms of how time, societal influence, and environment, have shaped participant perspectives. The data was subsequently transformed into graphs and charts using Microsoft™ Excel.

Presentation of Results and Findings

This narrative inquiry study recruited Connecticut educators with general or special education certifications, employed by urban school districts. Participants volunteered their time to participate in a Zoom interview. They were able to share their experiences and perspectives on implicit bias related to LRE. The Zoom interview was recorded, transcribed, and re-storied. The researcher re-storied the narratives and then shared the narratives with the participants, respectively. The re-storied narratives were organized into the following categories: (a) work with special education students, (b) experience with inclusion, and (c) professional development.

Narratives

The recruitment process resulted in eight participants. Each participant confirmed their certification in either special education or general education in Connecticut, along with their employment in an urban school district. Every participant articulated encountering some degree of difficulty in establishing an inclusive environment. Additionally, all participants expressed frustration with a lack of support in the classroom. Finally, all participants noted a lack of guidance and training related to LRE as well as a lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias.

Challenges and Perspectives: Bill

Bill holds a Connecticut certification in both Special Education and Intermediate Administration. They spent 17 years working as a special education teacher at a non-profit residential day school. For the past 10 years, they have worked as a special education teacher for a smaller urban district. Additionally, they always knew they wanted to be a teacher, as they always loved school and being a student. Bill saw teaching as an opportunity to have a role in shaping students' futures.

Work with Special Education Students. Bill works in an alternative high school program, which operates under the umbrella of the public school system. Notably, all attending students are classified as special education students. Approximately 85% of the students with whom Bill works with have labels of emotional disability. Bill participates in IEP meetings for students with emotional disabilities. Typically, the conversations are focused on how student disabilities impede their educational performance or progress. The focus of the conversations is largely on behavior. Bill's school has between 70 and 90 students, depending on the year and ongoing enrollment or referrals. In a single class, Bill has multiple grade levels. Bill shared that one year, he taught a classroom with students from sixth grade as well as ninth and tenth grades, all learning different subjects. This dynamic and diverse educational setting presents unique challenges and opportunities for Bill to tailor his approach to meet the varied needs of his students effectively.

The challenge in Bill's classroom is to differentiate for multiple grade levels and sometimes multiple subjects. For example, Bill mentioned that it is common to have a class comprising students from various grade levels, with one student focusing on art, another on math, and yet another on health. This environment is supported by the research of Grindal et al. (2019) and Marsico (2021) who reported that students in alternative schools or segregated

programs receive an inferior education. Further complicating matters, Bill shared that the teachers in this program often create their own curriculum materials and have little connection to the district's middle and high schools, despite granting students credit for these classes. Bill also shared that in a class of six students, there is usually one paraeducator to support. Bill said:

This is usually fine. You hear six students in a class and two adults and you say—what are you complaining about? But what about when it's six students but four different academic subjects: art, PE, history, and math. How do I teach all of that at once?

Bill's reflections underscore the need for robust support and resources to effectively manage such a complex and demanding teaching environment.

Understanding of LRE. Bill's understanding of LRE was twofold. They shared that their understanding of LRE refers to “not only where a student would best be able to access his/her education but also how they will be educated.” Bill believed that a student's LRE can help with the planning and delivery of instruction, which includes the design of the classroom environment as well. Bill discussed the social aspect or concept of LRE, specifically that LRE “can help guide my students' social interactions with others based on their individual levels of comfort.”

Professional Development. Bill's district has received four years of ongoing training on culturally relevant teaching. Bill reflected that because of those trainings he has “tried to be more cognizant of my interactions with my students, kind of like, ‘have I created a culturally responsive classroom environment? I've tried to be more aware of individual needs and how to help them access their education.’” This ongoing commitment to culturally relevant teaching is vital for fostering an inclusive and supportive educational atmosphere that addresses the diverse needs of all students.

Challenges and Perspectives: Anastasia

Anastasia holds a Connecticut Special Education Certification in grades K-12, along with a Connecticut General Education Certification for grades 1-6. Anastasia is in their third year of teaching. Their first year of teaching was spent in a self-contained Kindergarten classroom within an urban district. The next two years were also in an urban district, and Anastasia worked as an eighth-grade special education teacher, working in both a resource setting as well as co-teaching core subjects. Anastasia entered the field of education because they “always wanted to be some type of teacher.” As a college student, they decided to get a dual certification in special education based on their parents' encouragement to do so. As they progressed through the program, they realized they much preferred courses in special education and decided to pursue a job in a self-contained classroom, after graduation. Anastasia then realized that the stress of the job was concerning and that is when they applied to work as a special education teacher in a middle school in a different district.

Work with Special Education Students. Throughout Anastasia’s three-year career, they worked with students of varying disabilities. During the first year of teaching, Anastasia gained experience with students with autism and developmental delay. Now that Anastasia is assigned as a resource special education teacher they are “seeing a little bit of everything.” In their relatively brief career as a special education teacher, Anastasia has acquired experience in discussing with parents their child’s educational disability determination or label. Anastasia shared that parents have struggled with their child being labeled as “developmental delayed, and also emotionally disturbed.” Anastasia shared that parents’ reactions are often, “Are you sure? I don’t want that label on my kid.”

Understanding of LRE. Anastasia's understanding of LRE is that "you do the minimum the child needs before going to the next step. So, you want to do the least restrictive support first to see if they can be successful with that before going to the extremes." Anastasia uses this to guide their daily practice. For example, Anastasia shared that in a classroom they always start with a universal support. If they observe that a student or students require more support, they gradually introduce this assistance and track their progress. Anastasia shared that some students require modified math tests, but "if we have a new unit, new subject, sometimes I'll give a student who gets modified math tests an unmodified version and say, 'try this first because it's a new topic, and I think you might be able to do it. If it's too much, then we'll put what you need.' I'm trying to push students to see what they're capable of because I think they can do it." Anastasia's understanding of LRE is shaped by her willingness to challenge students and make determinations from those observations.

Anastasia shared that sometimes what they hear about students, or their labels can sometimes influence their interactions with the students. They mentioned that in their first year of teaching, they heard from other educators that a student was "on track for an outplacement." Immediately Anastasia felt overwhelmed and thought "if the student's getting outplaced anyway, what am I supposed to do to support him here? I kind of had that feeling that I'm in over my head and I'm not going to be able to support the student." Anastasia's lived experiences align with that of McCabe et al. (2020) study, which concluded that biases related to ability impact staff decision-making, including placement decisions.

As a special education teacher, Anastasia tries to contribute to an inclusive classroom by figuring out, "every day, how do I support the students that need support without singling them out, and making it clear to everyone like, hey, these students need more than you need."

Anastasia employs a strategy to counter the perception of singling out students by offering accommodations, such as a multiplication chart, to all students. They also make sure that when he is co-teaching, he is not only assisting students with special education services, but all students in the classroom. “I don’t just go to my students on my caseload, I try to go to every student, or every table, so I’m helping everybody. So, nobody thinks ‘he’s just here for those kids.’ I’m really here for the whole class.” Anastasia's approach highlights the importance of equitable teaching practices that enhance learning for all students, ensuring that support is seamlessly integrated into the classroom environment.

The area of inclusivity that Anastasia noted educators are struggling with, overall, is creating inclusive environments for students who need behavioral supports. Anastasia struggles the most with trying to figure out how to provide students with behavioral supports, while also not singling them out, especially at the middle school age. Despite monthly meetings with other staff members, creating collaborative supports for students remains a significant challenge. As Anastasia shared,

We meet with social work and administration, but we don’t really meet with the general education teachers. They are the ones who complain about the kid’s behavior and then say he can’t be in the classroom—but they’re not a part of our conversations. So, I go back and say ‘hey this is the plan we’re gonna try.’ And they just don’t think it would work or they don’t think they should have to do it. Kind of like—why do I have to do more work when they disrupt my class.

Anastasia’s lived experiences align with the study published by Tzucker (2022), which noted that a lack of skill set to manage disruptive behaviors impacts all students in the classroom, including the amount of time spent in a general education classroom.

Professional Development. Anastasia noted that they have not received any training or professional development related to implicit bias. “I don’t think I ever have, or if I have, it’s been in passing, like, a quick comment and then on to the next thing.” Reflecting on the lack of professional development provided by the Connecticut district Anastasia worked for, Anastasia said that the lack of professional development on implicit bias and LRE has “kind of pushed me to do more on my own.” However, Anastasia recognizes the need for such training because it would be:

Beneficial not just to special education teachers, but also general education teachers because many times talking about LRE for a student—it becomes debatable between regular and special education teachers. I don’t think everyone fully understands what it is and what it means. So, people are very quick to say, like, this isn’t the right placement for the student, but they don’t fully understand what they’re saying or what it means.

Anastasia’s lived experiences align with Woods’ (2018) research findings, indicating that all individuals demonstrate unconscious bias. Woods suggests the necessity of educating people about their biases to mitigate their impact, particularly toward marginalized communities.

Challenges and Perspectives: Giuliana

Giuliana has been teaching for over 20 years as a general education teacher. All of their experience has been in Connecticut. They have a combination of both rural and urban teaching experiences, as well as experience in both private and public schools. Giuliana possesses two teaching certifications in Connecticut: one for History/Social Studies for grades 7-12 and another for general education for grades K-6. Giuliana reflected that they have always had a desire to teach. Giuliana chose history and eventually focused on reading instruction because those were their favorite subjects in school.

Work with Special Education Students. Giuliana's involvement with special education students as a general education teacher has steadily grown over the years, especially within the last 5 years. They reflect that they have seen the numbers of special education students increase in their current district over the past 5 years. As a result of an increase in identified special education students, Giuliana's district is moving towards a co-teaching model at the middle school. They shared that this is the first year the district has implemented collaboratively taught classes in the middle school and, in one of their classes has only four students who are not identified as special education. Regarding their participation in IEP meetings, Giuliana expressed that as a general education teacher, they feel that their role is to share reports on classroom performance and grades, as well as share in-class observations. Regarding students with emotional disabilities, Giuliana believes that counselors primarily handle reporting on their progress. If a student is deemed intellectually disabled, "the special education teacher has taken the lead on that" reporting. Giuliana's lived experiences, specifically noting that the special education teacher reports and works with students with intellectual disabilities, is reflected in Bahr et al. (2023) study, which found that general education teachers lack the skills sets for working with specific groups of students with disabilities in an inclusive setting.

Understanding of LRE. Giuliana's understanding of LRE is that "all students access the social aspects of the classroom all the time." They shared that in one of their smaller classes, they always incorporate a weekly read-aloud. They acknowledged that one student:

probably isn't getting too much out of it, but they get the social aspect. And there are two that have been able to answer questions, as we've discussed the reading. So that's really good. But a little thing like that adds to the least restrictive environment.

Having to think about the least restrictive environment for students, has allowed Giuliana to focus more on the social aspect of teaching, “which is not what I thought about when I first started teaching.” Giuliana’s lived experiences are consistent with that of Sauer and Jorgensen (2016); Wehmeyer et al. (2021) and Bolourian et al. (2018), all of which found that when placed appropriately, inclusive settings provide benefits to all students as well as teachers, including an impact on teachers’ confidence, improved social skills, increased engagement and social relationships.

In response to the question about Giuliana’s awareness of their own implicit bias toward special education students, Giuliana mentioned that this awareness is most notable with “students who have emotional difficulties because it’s something you can see—in their classroom behavior.” Giuliana shared that many teachers share their struggles with in-class behaviors with other teachers and administrators, which is aligned with the research of Bahr et al. (2023) and Tzucker (2022). Giuliana’s recognition of her own biases, as well as the ability to recognize the biases of others, is reflected in Perry et al. (2015) study which concluded that those who are aware of their own biases can recognize and understand the biases of others.

I feel like the most effective thing that I personally have been able to do in the classroom as a regular teacher, is to remain calm and keep my voice very quiet, and try to address them, and be like, okay, you did great. Now just take a breath. Let’s try the next piece. I don’t want attention brought to them.

Despite this being Giuliana’s approach, they observe numerous teachers still grappling with managing behaviors. Giuliana noted, that teachers who struggle with classroom behaviors express that, “the kids end up in the office more often.” The findings of Wehmeyer et al. (2021) closely mirror Giuliana’s lived experience. Wehmeyer found that the lack of skill set among

general educators, to manage disruptive behaviors, resulted in a reduction in the amount of time spent in the general education classroom. The increase in special education students has led Giuliana to take on the role of creating an inclusive classroom environment, a contrast to ten years ago when they relied on the special education teacher for this responsibility. Giuliana recounted another instance of establishing an inclusive environment where students could play games and socialize together. Giuliana reflected that the biggest challenge in creating an inclusive environment is,

when someone is absent. When like, a paraeducator is absent our special education teacher has a meeting and there isn't coverage. Because you definitely need an extra set of hands for the little things. Like, if it's a student who needs bathroom breaks or if you have something where there is a behavior issue, you need to have that other person.

Overall, Giuliana believes that having two adults in the classroom benefits all students, not just the special education students. Despite holding this belief, Giuliana acknowledges that teacher and staff shortages affect the district's capacity to provide support. "I think it's one of the biggest challenges. There are no other bodies to fill the vacancies." Giuliana's experiences underscore the critical need for adequate staffing and training to effectively foster an inclusive learning environment and manage classroom dynamics efficiently.

Professional Development. Giuliana has had the unique experience of working in both urban and rural school districts. They mentioned that they had not undergone any professional development on implicit bias in the urban district; however, during their tenure at the rural district, Giuliana received professional development on racial and gender equity. Nevertheless, it was a one-year project, that was then left to independent study. Giuliana is among the educators who have persistently pursued self-education to enhance their understanding and empathy, a

practice corroborated by research conducted by Perry et al. (2015). According to Giuliana, while it “has brought awareness to a lot of us in school, the problem is, nothing else has continued with it the next year.” This situation highlights the need for ongoing and sustained professional development efforts to ensure that awareness and learning in critical areas such as implicit bias and equity are not only initiated but also continuously supported and advanced.

Challenges and Perspectives: Angelo

Angelo first became interested in teaching when they were a babysitter as a teenager and then as a daycare center provider in their early 20s. They enjoyed observing teachers as they crafted and assembled lesson plans and they appreciated the cohesion of thematic units. Their interest remained in early childhood education. Angelo began their educational journey by attaining an Associate’s degree and an internship in a church’s nursery school for children ages three and four. Angelo’s first job was outside of the classroom, creating a curriculum for the toddler age group. Angelo worked closely with daycare directors to implement the curriculum. Angelo quickly advanced and was given a position to oversee and supervise nursery centers in an urban setting in Connecticut. They, they took a few years to be at home with their family. Upon reentering the field, they assumed the role as director for a nursery school program. Angelo always created a close relationship between the school and family because they saw what an impact that relationship can have on student growth. During this tenure, Angelo attained their Bachelor’s degree and secured a paraeducator position in a rural town. They then obtained their certification in birth through kindergarten integrated special education. Angelo is currently employed in a public school as a preschool and pre-kindergarten special education teacher. Their original motivation to become a teacher was the excitement that they would get for working in the classroom. Angelo expressed that the excitement is still present in their work.

Work with Special Education Students. Angelo's experience with special education students differs from that of other participants in this narrative inquiry, attributed to the district age group with which they work. They work with students ages three and four and has responsibilities that include coordinating and participating in transition meetings for students moving from the Birth-to-Three program to enter the public preschool. Angelo shared the importance of this communication and relationship in preparing the student to enter the classroom. Angelo and their team consider what evaluations were already conducted and what new evaluations may need to be conducted. Angelo shared that at this time, they also learn more about the family, such as:

What are their strengths and weaknesses? What areas do they find challenging that we need to work on? Because we want to know about the child at home as well as what the experience will be like at school as we're setting those goals and objectives.

Angelo discussed a rise in intensive behaviors among students over the last five years. They emphasized the significance of collaborating with colleagues to strategize student interventions, stating, "We would have to start the process with our social worker and our psychologists to do a full battery of testing because it's such a young age and we don't have a lot of information on the child." Subsequently, the team would implement strategies to cultivate skills. Angelo spoke about the importance of universal strategies in classrooms to help students with emotional dysregulation. "We use things like the zones of regulations. We use Responsive Classroom, logical consequences." Angelo possesses a skill set specific to the population they serve. Angelo's lived experiences are aligned with the research of Wehmeyer et al. (2021), which suggests that special educators have specific skill sets (e.g., zones of regulations), that general educators sometimes lack.

While Angelo has seen a lot of intensive behaviors, they made it clear that labels of emotional disturbance have not been a part of their experience, thus far. This is, in part, because a label of emotional disturbance is not often given to children ages three and four. Nonetheless, Angelo emphasized the necessity of addressing behaviors and dysregulation, and thus, they are currently collaborating with the school team and family to implement interventions.

Understanding of LRE. Angelo's understanding of LRE is that educators should do everything possible to increase time with non-disabled peers, provided it is appropriate and benefits the child. Consideration of this involves Angelo and their team assessing the classroom needs of a child transitioning from the Connecticut Birth-to-Three program to preschool. Angelo considers such things as "is it appropriate for the services to be done in the classroom setting with peers, or is it better for a child to leave the classroom for a period of time and then transition back to practice those skills?" Angelo's interpretation of LRE is aligned with McCabe et al. (2020), Sauer and Jorgensen (2016), and Kauffman et al. (2021), all of whom agree that LRE is not a specific location, but rather services implemented to educate students with disabilities. Angelo also considers how skills can be taught within a small group setting to prevent individual students being removed from the classroom for service intervention. Angelo has the ability to increase the time students spend in the classroom by pre-teaching skills in a restrictive setting and then reintegrating the student for whole group instruction.

So, if I need to work with that child 30 minutes per week, I might break it up into two sessions, because the child can only focus for so long and I want the child to have one experience with me and one experience with my paraeducator, and then we come back together as a group to practice the skill. It increases the success rate for children.

Angelo's approach, aiming to keep students in the classroom setting as much as possible, includes occasions where delivering instruction outside the classroom is deemed suitable until the student is ready for reintegration, having nearly mastered the skill. Angelo also pointed out that a student's services outside of the classroom should remain confidential.

If somebody needs to leave for a period of time I say 'Oh they're just going to work on something, they'll be back in a few minutes.' Sometimes kids will ask 'why?' and I will say 'Oh, because that's how they learn better.' We're always trying to build empathy and compassion for the way that each and every child learns in the classroom.

Professional Development. Angelo received some in-district professional development related to bias but has sought out more on their own. One of the most valuable take-aways that Angelo gleaned from in-district professional development was through small group discussions presented by a facilitator. The colleagues emphasized the importance of using names throughout their discussion. So often in the younger classrooms, Angelo noted, staff members will say "Hi pumpkin or hi sweetheart." Angelo likes to model using names for their students to show them "when I use your name, that's so much more powerful than just hi sweetie." Angelo shared that they translate this practice to their work with adults as well, always addressing them by name when they can. Angelo's lived experiences are aligned with the research of Inan-Kaya et al. (2022), who found that implicit bias can be present in non-verbal and verbal communication and exchanges.

In order to preemptively counteract potential bias, Angelo and their colleagues incorporated some workshops for the parents of students in their classroom. Together, staff and parents discussed the idea that "you can't know what someone else is going through, or the idea that you haven't walked a mile in their shoes." Angelo noted that discussions about interactions

with young students in school and at home help not only within the school but also in communication between the school and parents.

Challenges and Perspectives: Bruno

Bruno decided to become a teacher because growing up, their dad was often laid off due to limited positions in his field. Consequently, Bruno aimed to pursue a career with job security. They thought education would always have positions available, so they pursued a degree in education.

Bruno has been teaching for over a decade, all of which has been in urban school districts. Their career began as a general education elementary teacher for younger middle school students for five years and then moved to another urban district to teach middle school as a special education teacher. Bruno made this move because they had obtained a Master's of Special Education, but needed to complete student teaching. They did not want to pay money to student teach, so they were able to find a job in another urban district as a Durational Shortage Area Permit candidate to complete student teaching while still being employed as a teacher. Bruno currently possesses two Connecticut teacher certifications, one in elementary education for kindergarten through sixth grade, and one in special education for grades kindergarten through high school.

Work with Special Education Students. Bruno's current role as a special education teacher is in an inclusive setting, which means that they co-teach Math and English courses for middle school students. In addition to co-taught classes, Bruno also has a resource class, which is made of up students with IEPs. During this class, students work in small groups on IEP goals and objectives, and assignments that they might need support on. In their years as a special education teacher, Bruno said that they "have pretty extensive experience with emotional disabilities."

Prior to assuming the role of a resource/inclusion teacher, Bruno worked in a program where most students were labeled with emotional disabilities.

As a special education teacher who co-teaches in inclusive classrooms, Bruno makes it a point to help all students, rather than only focusing on students with IEPs. Bruno's co-teachers often enact a true collaborative model in which Bruno and the teacher take turns teaching the content of the course, while the other teacher circulates the classroom to check student progress and help students. Bruno's lived experiences align with the research of Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) and Wehmeyer et al. (2021), all of whom reported the positive impacts of inclusive classrooms on teachers and students.

Understanding of LRE. Bruno shared their "book sense" of the meaning of LRE as "the maximum time a student has with nondisabled peers, but they should also be successful in that with the support provided." One way that Bruno works with LRE is when they co-teach. Bruno makes it a point to help all students in the classroom so as not to highlight the students with IEPs by only helping them. Bruno does this because "I don't want to embarrass the students; they're with their peers." Bruno shared that there are some students who prefer to be pulled out for services, and others "despite having the label of ID or ED, they don't want to be called to in front of their peers like that. So, you have to be able to recognize what students are comfortable with." This may be associated with the findings of DeCuir-Gunby and Bindra (2022) and Gullo et al. (2019), all of whom observed that students are impacted by personal perceptions of intelligence, aptitude, and ability.

Bruno then expressed feeling that individuals throughout their district have varying understandings of LRE. This phenomenon is observed in other contexts, as evidenced by McCabe et al. (2020), who concluded that some perceive LRE as a physical location, while

others regard it as a service. Bruno also expressed feeling limited in their ability to influence the determination of a student's LRE as a special education teacher. They shared, "I get the students that the higher-ups give me. You know, a lot of times the data I find is not really relevant. It's what other people determined to be the LRE." Bruno's experiences are seen in literature such as Home et al. (2019), who found that both general and special education teachers lack comprehensive knowledge of special education law, including LRE, and they are unable to apply such law to personal practice. Illustrating this further, Bruno shared their current experience as a special education teacher at an urban middle school. They expressed that their current caseload has three students with the label of intellectual disability. Bruno said that this was unusually high in their experience and exists because:

There's currently an ID program at my school, you know—for all the kids in the district, and so they are in a self-contained classroom, but they're finding that the ID program is getting too big, so they're exiting kids, but my question is, now that these kids are placed in an inclusive classroom, there is a disproportionate number of ID students in our school versus the other middle schools in the district.

Bruno expressed another concern about the placement of the students in the ID program, stating, "there's too many kids in the one ID program for the district, so instead of hiring another teacher for another classroom, they're exiting the kids and putting them in an inclusive program." They continued to share the impact of this decision:

It's tough on the science and social studies teachers because they don't have support with a co-teacher, often times they don't even have a para. So now you're getting students with IQs of 55, 56, who need support and modifications. And, also, the classes have almost 50% students with IEPs. It's really tough.

Bruno's lived experiences exist in other areas of education, as noted in a study published by Politou (2022), who found that general education teachers do not feel confident in instructing inclusive classrooms because they feel they have inadequate training in special education. Kroesch and Peeples (2021) reported data that supports Bruno's lived experiences, in their study which found that 71.1% of general education teachers do not feel capable of working with students with severe disabilities in the general education classroom.

Despite these challenges, Bruno admitted that sometimes they have underestimated a student's ability based on "what the paperwork said." Bruno shared they had a student with a label of ID on their caseload in an inclusive classroom and assumed that the student could only participate in limited ways based on the IQ and reports they had read on the student. Bruno's initial bias is seen in other areas of research as well. Agran et al. (2002) found that even special education teachers make assumptions about student ability and placement in the general education classroom. Bruno realized a few weeks in "he is certainly more capable of what the paperwork says and I wonder how many people wouldn't challenge him based on the paperwork." After thinking about this, Bruno shared the experience with her colleagues in a team meeting, in the hopes of having others step back and consider how they may program for a student based solely on the paperwork and "don't just strictly go by what we think an ID student is because even though they have the same label, there's different abilities. You know, it's not just one size fits all." Bruno's lived experience in acknowledging bias holds significance, as such bias poses a barrier to students with disabilities accessing the general education classroom (Morgan et al., 2023).

Professional Development. Bruno shared that they had never been trained on implicit bias. Despite this, Bruno believes that they are working collaboratively with their colleagues to

start to make strides in discussing implicit bias. Bruno referenced the example of not assuming ability level based solely on an IQ score. Bruno thinks that all people in education should be involved in such discussion and collaboration, including administrators, co-teachers, and paraeducators.

Challenges and Perspectives: Aleta

Aleta entered the field of education after deciding that their love for baseball would not make a livable wage. They loved history as well and looked to careers that would allow them to continue to study and discuss history. Aleta's love for history, however, allowed them to find a career in education. Now, they have been a history teacher for 11 years, all of which have been in the same urban district. Aleta has worked at three different schools within the district, teaching students in grades five through eight. They have taught several history courses in these roles and hold a current Connecticut teaching certification in history/social studies for grades 7-12. Reflecting on their career path, Aleta expressed fondness for their current occupation, noting "thinking back on it, it's kind of funny how it all worked out." Aleta has since completed their master's degree and continues to teach in an urban setting.

Work with Special Education Students. Aleta teaches general education classes and shared that they have students with IEPs in their class. Aleta does not have a co-teacher in any of their classes. For students with IEPs, Aleta shared that they "give them the exact same work that any regular education student will get, but the difference is, as long as they try and participate, they could get the whole thing wrong, I will give them a 70%." Aleta shared that they have no support from special education teachers in their class, despite having several students with IEPs in their class. Aleta admitted that they used to modify assignments for students, but it became overwhelming, and they felt it drew attention to students who receive modifications as a part of

their IEP. The absence of support from special education results in all students receiving the same assignment, with students who have IEPs being awarded a 70% if effort is perceived. Aleta's lived experiences are similar to those of other research findings. Politou (2022) and Kroesch and Peebles (2021) all found that general education teachers experience feelings of being unsupported and unprepared to assist special education teachers within the general education setting, this includes a lack of access to support staff and training.

Aleta participates in student IEP meetings but does not recall working with students with ID or ED specifically. Aleta's role in IEP meetings has been limited over the past few years because meetings do not often align with their prep periods in their schedule. Regarding the special education students that Aleta has in their class, Aleta reported that "most of the kids I have are just regular special education kids. They don't really need any special services or anything like that." Aleta reported that they have not had students with ID in their classroom. Regarding students with a label of ED, Aleta shared that they "try to learn my boundaries with them, so triggers and things like that." In preparation for their classroom, Aleta reads the students' IEPs to learn how to interact appropriately with them on an individualized level. Aleta shared that they are very conscious of which students they can and cannot use sarcasm with, for example. Aleta recognizes that although they preferred funny and sarcastic teachers when they were a student, not all students respond to that mode of communication.

Understanding of LRE. Aleta had a very honest conversation about LRE. Regarding Aleta's understanding of LRE, their response was "I don't know if I even know that one. What does that mean? Maximum time spent with peers without disabilities? I might not be able to help with that question, because I don't even know anything about that stuff." Aleta went on to share that, as an educator with a general education certification,

the only special education class I've ever taken was when I was getting my master's degree. It was a required class. So, you know, they don't keep us up to date on any of these acronyms and stuff like that.

When asked to consider how LRE influences their interactions with students of varying disabilities, Aleta was also honest in their answer saying "Yeah, see? I don't know that one. So, I don't want to give you some bogus answer." Aleta's lived experiences are reflected in other research studies. Kauffman et al. (2021) reported two separate systems of education, which are created by separate training programs for general and special educators. Likewise, Aleta reflected on their lack of knowledge related to LRE, which is also seen in Home et al. (2019), in which they found that educators lack comprehensive knowledge of LRE and its implementation.

Professional Development. Aleta shared that their district had one professional development on implicit bias. "That's the only one we've ever had. I know they say we'll take it from there and try to roll within, and then it just ends. So that was last year. We haven't heard anything since." The professional development on implicit bias focused specifically on race and gender, specifically related to bias in standardized testing and current grading policies. Aleta expressed that they "didn't really agree with it." Through conversation, Aleta shared what they meant by this statement:

I think there's certain areas we need to work on, but I don't believe that how we grade is biased toward anybody. It's just this is how school is. This is how it works. It doesn't matter what you look like, you know?

Aleta shared that there are changes their district has made in a positive direction. Aleta shared that the history department is teaching more diverse courses and that they believe this is a productive way to combat implicit bias.

Challenges and Perspectives: John

John ended up in the field of education as a second career. Following graduation from college, their entry into the field of public health research ensued. John felt that the “fun of science” was lacking in research, after a few years, which led to them to return to school for their master’s degree in education. Currently, they have been teaching for nine years. John has a current Connecticut teaching certification in general science, biology and chemistry for grades seventh through twelfth grades. In the span of their career, John has taught in two districts, one rural and one urban.

Work with Special Education Students. John shared that they have a fair amount of experience teaching students with special education labels, mostly because John teaches the lowest level of chemistry. They have been active in developing the curriculum for this course. Over the past few years, John’s district has restructured the courses. Previously there were only two levels of chemistry. They mentioned that in these classes, the number of students with IEPs were disproportionately high. Since the district has moved to four sections, the classes are more diversified. In their classes, John explained that the reason for having very few students labeled with ID is that these students are typically placed in either general science courses or special education courses. This observation is corroborated by the research of Wehmeyer et al. (2021) who found that students with ID spend the least amount of time in a general education setting. John does have students with the label of ED in their classes. John’s experience in individualized education plan (IEP) meetings is somewhat limited, but John shared that they often get pulled for PPTs of students with ED. They mentioned, “the conversation usually stems around just making sure that accommodations are in place for the student. I usually have a pretty good rapport with students, so the PPTs have no major issues.” John's emphasis on fostering student rapport was

acknowledged as a key factor contributing to his success in working with students and making a positive impact.

John's adoption of a new practice after several years of teaching involves reviewing student IEPs. When John first started teaching, they would read all IEPs at the beginning of school. Now, John will do a quick review, but really wants to see what students can do in their class, before assuming a student's ability. This experience is reflected in recent research as well, in that identifying one's bias can change practice (Woods, 2018). John's other strategy that they use in class is to build rapport. John shared that they have students with ED in their courses and that building rapport is the best strategy to keep students in class. John's experience stands apart from other research findings, which generally indicates that the general education teachers lack the necessary skill set to effectively work with students exhibiting ED or disruptive behaviors (Tzucker, 2022).

Understanding of LRE. John's understanding of LRE is that "a student would be incorporated into the general education curriculum to the full extent that they can kind of immerse themselves in a normal, non-special education classroom while maintaining their ability to learn and access education." John continued to reflect on their understanding that teachers are legally required to fulfill all of the accommodations listed in students' IEPs, acknowledging that this responsibility can be overwhelming. "At the secondary level, when you see kids for a limited amount of time, and you have hundreds of kids cycling through your classroom, I feel like we do our best." As a means of balancing their responsibilities with the time available, John shared,

If I have a class, which I know is not the right way to do it, but if I have a class, and I know it's not even legal, I've had classes with greater than 50% IEPs. And when this

happens, I feel like I ended up looking through the accommodations and some of the major ones that most kids have, I just do for everybody.

John reflected on a lack of support in the classroom, from special education teachers, as well as a lack of para support due to staffing shortages. Often, John is the only adult in their classroom. In the few times that John has advocated for a paraeducator and received support, they reflected that the paraeducator will then get pulled to substitute in a class where there is no teacher.

John encountered a challenge when contemplating inclusive classrooms, particularly concerning Advanced Placement (AP) courses. John noted that while teaching an AP course at their high school, instructors had to uphold a specific standard of rigor. On the actual exam, John shared that their understanding was that “the only accommodation a student would be given is extra time, but not like word banks. So, the challenge is, how can you get the kid to where they need to be?” John has invested a lot of time working with students with IEPs placed in AP courses. John shared that they would sit one-on-one with the student.

I’ve met with her, we sit down, we look at an exam that she took. I want her to explain to me her thinking so that I can understand what’s going through her brain when she’s looking at certain things and then see how I can help her approach those in the future. Another strategy that John has worked on with students with IEPs on standardized tests is in relation to pacing for an extended time accommodation. John shared that they often must explain to students that even with an accommodation such as extended time, “pacing is still gonna matter, so once we know how much time you’re gonna have, let’s work with that and figure out what strategies we can do so that you can still meet even that extended timeframe.”

John reflected that they notice a generalized difference between students electing to enroll in AP courses versus those placed in lower-level courses:

I think in the higher-level classes, the kids are really motivated, lots of time, so they tend to be more willing to work on strategies. In the lower level classes, sometimes these kids have a lot more going on outside or actually, I would say one of the challenges that I have with the kids is that you get some low level science classes where the kids have never had a good experience in science before because their teachers have kind of like acted like they don't matter or they're not capable. And I want to be a safe place for them where they like, again, I want to focus on their strengths and find ways so that they can meet those successes and feel like they're not worth that education. I don't know; it drives me crazy.

John's attitude, as a general education teacher, is not reflected in the general research found. For example, most general education teachers express a lack of skill set and support to teach students with special education services (Politou, 2022; Kroesch & Peeples, 2021).

Professional Development. In John's response to whether they had ever received any professional development related to recognizing implicit bias, they shared that they district had never provided any. John did share that they are involved in the district's student intervention team. Through this process, initiated by the district, John and their colleagues have frequent discussions related to tiered supports for student support teams. Although the district has not provided any specific training related to implicit bias, John has engaged in their own professional development and discussions related to implicit bias. John shared,

one of the things that's difficult is lots of times when, and it depends on who's delivering the information on implicit bias, but sometimes they can make people feel guilty or bad. And I feel like, from the biological perspective, it's normal to have some bias because that's a protective behavior of being slightly like not sure of something that's different

from you. So like, that's an instinctual response. And that's okay, but understanding how to respond to that is okay, too. So, I think it's good to be aware of that, and maybe have our educators kind of reflect on that and how they're interacting with students.

John reflected on their experience in teaching the lower-level chemistry classes, specifically the way they assume their students' self-esteem is impacted by previous interactions with teachers.

John shared:

If we, as educators, can step back and see that you may spend more time looking for what their strengths are or not assuming that they don't want to be there. And then again, you rapport in your classroom is going to be better and better connections with students, results in better educational outcomes. So I think it's [implicit bias] an important thing for teachers to be aware of.

John's sentiment is consistent with recent research, which found that unconscious bias is linked to all individuals in every profession, and educating oneself on implicit bias will lessen the impact (Crenshaw, 2017; Woods, 2018).

Challenges and Perspectives: Penelope

Penelope chose a career in education because they always loved school and as a child would often be found in the basement, hosting a class for their stuffed animals. Penelope shared:

I have naturally been good at explaining things to people in a variety of ways. Like if I explain it one way, they don't get it, I'm like okay how might you understand it and then change it up. And I tend to have patience for that sort of thing.

As an elementary education major Penelope realized that they much preferred working with older students, so they changed their focus to secondary education. They graduated in a year when Connecticut laid off thousands of teachers, so they began working in marketing and did not

go right into teaching, as they had planned. Penelope simultaneously worked in marketing for several years and applied for substitute teaching positions. Penelope found little satisfaction in their role as a substitute, prompting her to abandon her aspirations in education. Instead, they opted to pursue a master's degree abroad. Upon their return to the United States, they once again sought out a teaching position. Penelope's first full-time job at a school was not as a teacher, but as an urban high school as a guidance counselor. Throughout their tenure at the school, Penelope, in that role, accepted a long-term substitute position as an English teacher, making use of their certification. Following the long-term substitute position, Penelope secured a position as a high school English teacher.

Work with Special Education Students. Penelope shared that currently, every class they teach has students with IEPs enrolled. Penelope reflected that oftentimes special education teachers do not explicitly share the educational label (i.e., ID or ED) of the student. None of Penelope's classes have any students with ID enrolled. Penelope shared that often they assume a student has an emotional disability if they have a behavior plan as a part of their IEP. However, they also shared that in their experience they feel as though they find out a student has an emotional disability because "we find out as events happen, and we get tidbits of information shared with us. And, then we're like 'oh, that would have been great to know; that would have been helpful.'" This lack of communication was sighted as an area of frustration by Penelope.

Penelope's experience in IEP meetings has recently shifted due to changes in the administration. Previously, Penelope's administrator would facilitate IEP meetings. Following the collection of information on student progress from each class, the administrator would then report to the IEP team. Penelope preferred this model because:

Right off the bat, it was really positive. Because you're sitting at the table and the principal is sharing strengths from all of your teachers and she would hold back the areas of growth to not overwhelm them. She would kind of summarize if she saw patterns that were the same. And then she would go to the students and families and sort of ask, you know, now that you've heard from all your teachers, does that sort of jive with what you've been experiencing. Do you feel the same or different?

Penelope felt that they were able to learn about facilitating a meeting and having purposeful conversation, focused on one or two areas of growth for the student and team to focus on. Recently, the district has experienced a change in leadership. Penelope shared that teams are now directed to "don't hold back, say anything that's on your mind." However, structure lacks in the meeting and Penelope finds that often no one reports anything specific. Penelope shared that this may be in part, because the facilitator always has the student speak up about their progress and they often share that "everything is going great," which is followed by teachers agreeing with this statement. The few times Penelope has spoken up with areas of growth, "you feel like you're set up to fail in that environment because nobody's saying anything, like realistic about how the person's education is going." Penelope has had students who begin meetings with rants, saying:

They just ranted and said that they hate your class and you're doing it all wrong. Then it's your turn to report out and it looks like I'm responding to the negative comments when it's just honest feedback I was going to say anyway. The vibe is just uncomfortable, and I don't feel like I have any support.

This shift in the approach to IEP meetings, with less structure and open-ended feedback, poses challenges for Penelope and her colleagues, emphasizing the need for clear guidelines and supportive leadership to navigate these sensitive discussions effectively.

Understanding of LRE. Penelope shared that in their experience, no one seems to agree on the meaning of LRE. This is supported by research which determined that some individuals view LRE as a place while others view LRE as a service (McCabe et al., 2020). Penelope's understanding of LRE is, that it is:

An environment where that student could most successfully learn where they were not held back by whatever they may be coming to the classroom with, whether it's physical disability or emotional disability, or sometimes we have medical. I know we've had students that aren't able to have screen time. But I've been confused recently.

Penelope's reflections underscore the complexity and varying interpretations of LRE, highlighting the need for clearer guidelines and consistent training to ensure that all educational professionals share a common understanding of this crucial concept.

Professional Development. Penelope reported that they have not received any professional feedback related to implicit bias. Regarding training deemed beneficial, Penelope expressed a desire for additional collaboration time with special education teachers. Currently, Penelope works with special education teachers on a limited basis. They have found that they need to navigate student's IEPs on their own.

Themes

Each participant was provided the opportunity to review the re-storied transcripts. The researcher then manually coded the re-storied narratives for themes. Three themes emerged from the coding process: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (b) a lack of guidance and training related to LRE, and (c) a lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias. The first theme was challenges in creating an inclusive environment. Participants shared experiences related to inclusivity in the general education environment, specifically a lack of support and

resources and a frustration with the lack of support in the classroom. Both general and special education teachers expressed a frustration with a lack of adult support in inclusive settings. The second theme that emerged was also collective of all participants' experiences. This was a lack of guidance and training related to LRE. Among all the participants, each had a somewhat different definition and understanding of LRE. The final theme that emerged among all participants' collective experiences was a lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias. The few participants who mentioned receiving training on implicit bias unanimously reported a lack of ongoing professional development in this area. Each of the four themes was analyzed through a temporal, social, and spatial perspective (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017).

Theme 1: Challenges in Creating an Inclusive Environment

Temporal. Each of the participants expressed frustration with a lack of time in one way or another. Both Bill and Anastasia noted a lack of time, with Anastasia specifically referencing a lack of time for collaboration to plan for students. Penelope had a similar experience in sharing that there is a communication breakdown between special education teachers and general education teachers. Penelope shared that in their experience they feel as though they find out a student has an emotional disability "as the events happen. And we get tidbits of information shared with us. An then we're like 'oh that would have been great to know; that would have been helpful.'" This is a significant area in education, supported by Politou (2022), who found that general education teachers consistently express concerns about full inclusion due to inadequate training in special education. A lack of time to communicate and/or collaborate with special education teachers would detract from the ability to increase awareness of special education skills to general education teachers. Relatedly, this lack of collaboration would also deter general education teachers from feeling prepared to manage a fully inclusive classroom.

The theme of time also impacts teachers' ability to plan for an inclusive classroom. Aleta admitted that they used to modify assignments for students, but it became overwhelming, and they felt it singled students out. Due to Aleta's perception that general education teachers received no support from special education teachers, they simply assigned the same tasks to all students. Students with IEPs were awarded 70% as long as effort was evident. Also related to a lack of time, John reflected that when they first started teaching, they would read all students' IEPs at the beginning of school. Now, John will do a quick review, but really wants to see what students can do in their class before assuming a student's ability. Aleta's experience is supported by Kroesch and Peeples (2021) study, which found that over 80% of general education teachers do not collaborate with related service or paraeducators and almost 80% did not feel they could differentiate for students with severe disabilities. The lack of collaboration or support between general and special education teachers has led to a lack of differentiation and inclusive planning in the least restrictive environment.

Social. Anastasia, Giuliana and Angelo each discussed changes in education over the years, including an increase in special education identified students as well as an increase in behaviors, which has created challenges in effectively planning for inclusive classrooms. Disruptive behaviors have been the focus of many studies in the realm of education, following the Covid-19 pandemic. Tzucker (2022) noted that a lack of skill sets to manage disruptive behaviors impacts all students in the classroom and Wehmeyer et al. (2021) found that general educators more often lack the skill set to manage disruptive behaviors.

Giuliana noted that they have noticed an increase in special education referrals and identification within the past five years. The implementation of the co-teaching model in her district addresses the increasing demand for inclusive classrooms. Anastasia and Angelo both

noted an increase in students with significant behaviors, which are often referred to the special education teachers to manage.

Spatial. The participants narratives revealed that the environment of classrooms can sometimes make it challenging for teachers to effectively manage an inclusive classroom. Bruno, Giuliana and John noted that in many classes there are more than 50% students with IEPs. Even though they recognize that it is not right—to balance their responsibility with their available time, John shared, “If I have a class, which I know is not the right way to do it, but if I have a class, and I know it’s not even legal, I’ve had classes with greater than 50% IEPs. And when this happens, I feel like I ended up looking through the accommodations and some of the major ones that most kids have”. This revelation points to a systemic issue where the ideal of inclusion is compromised by practical limitations, emphasizing the need for structural changes to better support teachers and ensure compliance with legal standards for inclusive education.

Theme 2: Lack of Guidance and Training Related to LRE

Temporal. Anastasia expressed frustration as a special education teacher, she finds general education teachers are often excluded from the ongoing conversations and planning meetings for students. Anastasia predicted that this is why the general education teachers have less buy-in to behavior plans. John shared that the time invested in student intervention teams has been significant in his understanding of student placement. Discussions related to tiered supports for students are frequently held by John and their colleagues, as indicated by the district’s directives. John’s experience is supported research that suggests continuous conversations and collaboration to reveal implicit bias, which exists in all classrooms, will make positive progress (Inan-Kaya et al., 2022; Woods, 2018).

Social. Bill, Angelo, and Giuliana noted that their experience has shown them that keeping a student in their least restrictive environment has a positive impact on the students' social interactions and experiences. Anastasia and Aleta both acknowledged that many people seem to have different understandings of LRE. Aleta shared that, as a general education teacher, they took only one course on special education. Anastasia and Penelope both described experiences that highlighted a lack of consistency in the definition or implementation of LRE. Bruno revealed an experience of the district not consulting with teachers prior to changing a student's placement. Bruno felt that they did not have a voice in the subject, even though they knew students were not in their LRE. The inconsistent definitions or understandings of LRE is supported by research (Lim, 2020).

Spatial. Angelo highlighted their experience that a student's education does not have to take place in only one area. Angelo noted that sometimes it is appropriate to give instruction outside of the classroom and then reintegrate the student when the skill is almost mastered. Angelo also noted that a student's services outside of the classroom should not be made public. "If somebody needs to leave for a period of time, I say 'Oh they're just going to work on something, they'll be back in a few minutes.' Sometimes kids will ask 'why?'" Bruno, in contrast, shared a story about student placement, whether in a self-contained setting or full inclusion. Based on the experience, there appeared to be no pull-out services or minor adjustments to a placement. In Bruno's experience, as a teacher, they witnessed LRE as a place as opposed to individualized services.

Theme 3: Lack of Guidance and Training Related to Implicit Bias

Temporal. Three teachers among the eight participants who received training or guidance on implicit bias shared their experiences. Bill shared that their district has been

provided with ongoing training since 2020. Giuliana's district gave a short series of professional developments beginning in 2020 but have been left to independent study and personal choice since that time. Such trainings were likely the result of the Connecticut law to reduce racial disparity in education (Public Act 21-35, 2021). Aleta had a similar experience to both Bill and Giuliana. Their district had one training "I know they say we'll take it from there and try to roll within, and then it just ends. So that was last year. We haven't heard anything since". The inconsistency and lack of follow-through in these training initiatives highlight a significant gap between legislative intentions and the actual implementation of programs aimed at reducing bias in educational settings.

Social. Several of the teachers who were interviewed shared that the implicit bias that was incorporated into professional development specifically focused on race and gender. This is supported by research, which found that although conversations around equity and implicit bias were more prevalent in United States education, such conversations often did not address implicit bias specific to ability (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2023). All teachers mentioned that the district's training lasted for only one year. John has engaged in their own professional development and discussions related to implicit bias. John shared,

one of the things that's difficult is lots of times when, and it depends on who's delivering the information on implicit bias, but sometimes they can make people feel guilty or bad. And I feel like, from the biological perspective, it's normal to have some bias because that's a protective behavior of being slightly like not sure of something that's different from you. So, like, that's an instinctual response.

Spatial. Some teachers revealed through semi-structured interviews that discussions around implicit bias have altered their classroom practices. For example, Bill shared those

discussions about implicit bias has aided in them in “creating a classroom environment where I am more aware of my interactions with students.” Bill’s lived experience is supported by research that noted that people need to be educated about their biases to help reduce the impact of such biases on marginalized communities (Woods, 2018). Anastasia shared that they believe training on implicit bias would be beneficial to all educators. Building on that notion, Angelo has continued to pursue professional development on bias independently, aiming to further evolve their practice.

Summary

This chapter aimed to investigate the impact of implicit bias on the perceptions of Connecticut school personnel regarding students’ abilities concerning the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Emotional Disability (ED), and Intellectual Disability (ID) within the context of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Eight participants were recruited to participate in this narrative inquiry study. A narrative inquiry methodology was chosen to understand the experiences of individuals in the field of education, considering the limitations of the numerical data in capturing nuanced experiences. All participants in this study fulfilled the requirements, possessing a current Connecticut educator certification in special and/or general education. Additionally, each participant was employed in an urban district.

Recruitment of participants was conducted through public school district websites and private teacher Facebook groups. Eligibility required participants to be employed by an urban school district in Connecticut and hold certification as either a preschool-12 special and/or general education teacher. The recruitment process took 67 days, resulting in a total of eight participants. The participants had the opportunity to share their lived experiences regarding implicit bias and LRE, via a recorded platform utilizing Zoom. The shared experiences of the

participants reflected on aspects such as the inclusive classroom, training on LRE, and training on implicit bias within the public school system. The researcher immersed themselves in the data, organizing individual stories into three categories: (a) work with special education students, (b) understanding of LRE, and (c) professional development. The data was analyzed through manual coding, identifying common trends and themes. The participants shared common themes of: (a) frustration with creating an inclusive classroom, (b) a lack of training related to LRE, and (c) a lack of training on implicit bias. Themes were then analyzed from the temporal, social, and spatial perspectives to understand how time, societal influence, and environment shaped participant perspectives. The findings will be used in conjunction with synthesized research from Chapter 2 to make recommendations for further research and actions in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

According to the theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw (2017) asserts the presence of implicit bias within all individuals. The problem addressed in this study was the need for a greater understanding of how the innate presence of implicit bias among certified educators impacts their view of student capabilities and achievement, thus impacting placement decisions in the classroom. Insights into the perspective of both special and general education teachers concerning implicit bias and student placement decisions were obtained through a narrative inquiry study. This research explored the lived experiences of eight Connecticut educators in urban districts. The participants held either general or special education Connecticut teaching certifications.

The researcher developed this study based on their own lived experiences as a general and special education teacher and administrators in urban districts in Connecticut, which included student programming, education, and professional development experiences. The researcher's firsthand experience, coupled with their comprehensive exploration through a formal literature review, highlighted that bias, particularly related to ability, may lead to students receiving educational services in a restrictive environment. This environment, at its most restrictive programming, entails zero percent of a student's school day spent with non-disabled peers. Wehmeyer et al. (2021) and Gottfried (2014) explored restrictive environments and the impact of such environments on student achievement, including more behavioral episodes, poorer interpersonal skills, lack of rigor, and effective instruction. Seeking to convey the attitudes of general educators toward working with special education students in the general education setting, Politou (2022) highlighted a need for more classroom supports. Argan et al. (2002) found that special education teachers also possess a bias toward inclusive classrooms,

specifically a disagreement with educating students with severe disabilities in an inclusive environment. Hence, bias regarding special education labels and abilities is present among both general and special education teachers.

This study distinguishes itself by concentrating on urban districts in Connecticut, characterized by classrooms with the highest student-to-staff ratios. (Connecticut Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, this study is unique in its focus on implicit bias to include ability level. Three primary research questions guided this inquiry:

Research Question 1: What actions do Connecticut certified educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

Research Question 2: What barriers do Connecticut certified educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement least restrictive environment?

Research Question 3: What professional development experiences have informed Connecticut's certified educators ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment?

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

This research employed a narrative inquiry approach, enabling the investigator to enhance comprehension of the challenges encountered in urban districts concerning the selection of placements for students with Intellectual Disability (ID) and Emotional Disability (ED) (Knibb, 2013). The narrative inquiry model seeks to understand individuals' experiences in three distinct dimensions; temporality, sociality, and spatiality (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) were pioneers in the utilization of narrative inquiry and

emphasized its significance in understanding the experiences of individuals in the field of education.

The researcher proceeded to review each of the re-storied narratives, after the transcripts underwent re-storying and member checking. Subsequently, the narratives were organized into three categories: (a) work with special education students, (b) experience with inclusion, and (c) professional development. Additionally, an in-depth analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes within each category.

Member checking completion allowed the researcher to manually code each interview, identifying common trends and associating them with themes. Various colors were utilized to signify different ideas, while akin ideas were accentuated with identical colors. Once this was completed, the researcher utilized a color-coded Excel document to organize trends and themes. The researcher determined the following themes: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (b) lack of guidance and training related to least restrictive environment (LRE), and (c) lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias. The researcher then analyzed the re-storied narratives from the temporal, social, and spatial perspectives (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). In other words, the researcher examined the narratives in terms of how time, societal influence, and environment, have shaped participant perspectives.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut school personnel perceptions of students' capabilities in relation to the ID and ED associated with LRE. This study aimed to uncover the underlying biases that may influence decision-making processes regarding placement options for students with ID and ED. The researcher aimed to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1

What actions do Connecticut certified educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment? The first research question sought to uncover which actions Connecticut certified educators believe are most effective in overcoming implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment. The experiences of certified educators were varied. There was a clear frustration with a lack of time and opportunity for collaboration. This was expressed by both the special education and general education participants. Both special education and general education teachers advocated for this time and noted that this collaboration is crucial in planning for inclusive environments. Anastasia has sought out her own training related to implicit bias. Some participants highlighted their ongoing pursuit of professional development concerning implicit bias, among them, general educators John and Giuliana and special educator Anastasia. Angelo's experience at the preschool and pre-kindergarten level was slightly different than other participants. Angelo noted that they are often able to work closely with their team members to implement an inclusive classroom. Angelo worked collaboratively with their team to deliver individualized instruction or pre-teaching to students, primarily aiming to reintegrate them into most of the lesson.

Many participants shared that they had no formal training regarding implicit bias, and all participants shared that they had not had direct training relating to implicit bias and special education students. The study's significance is underscored by the absence of identical definitions and understandings of LRE among the participants, with one noting a lack of noteworthy experience with LRE. This is supported by research in the literature review, which revealed that despite its addition in 1990, there continues to be disagreement over LRE, which impacts the consistency in which it can be implemented (Lim, 2020; Sauer & Johnson, 2016). A contributing factor to this disagreement over the meaning of LRE, is the absence of federal law

definitions for terms (e.g., inclusion and mainstream) frequently employed by educators in discussions about LRE (Underwood, 2018). Regardless, each participant shared how they had been able to effectively overcome implicit bias in their classroom practices. Each of the special education teachers noted that when they co-taught in general education settings, they made efforts to work with all students rather than only work with special education students. Two general education teachers and one special education teacher reported that they no longer read IEPs before meeting a student. Instead, they present students with unmodified work to assess their capabilities and offer accommodations as necessary.

Research Question 2

What barriers do Connecticut certified educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement least restrictive environment? The second research question, which guided this study, sought to answer which barriers Connecticut certified educators perceive as being problematic in increasing time in the general education environment and/or best implement least restrictive environment. All participants expressed frustrations with a lack of time to collaborate with special and general education teachers. Furthermore, all general education teachers expressed frustration with the lack of support from special education teachers. This included any frustrations with a lack of time to collaborate. The solitude in planning for classes with over 50% special education students persisted for Giuliana until their district implemented a co-teaching model. Aleta, who's district does not have a co-teaching model, continues to be frustrated with a lack of support from special education teachers. They have implemented their own strategies to provide education to their students, but admit that they are not meeting IEPs individually, but are instead giving all students with IEPs the same assignment.

The challenges encountered in designing an inclusive classroom are not limited to the general education teachers who took part in this study. Anastasia, a middle school special education teacher, noted that the lack of collaboration time with general education teachers makes sharing student plans difficult. They shared that this is particularly true for students with behavior plans. Anastasia shared that general education teachers are often not present at student support meetings, and thus do not have the opportunity to provide input or ask questions about a student's plan before being asked to implement it. Bruno, also a middle school special education teacher, shared that implementing LRE can be difficult for general education teachers. They shared that their district collapsed some of the self-contained classrooms and placed students in the general education setting. Bruno, the special education teacher expressed that general education teachers struggle to modify the assignments for students entering the class halfway through the year and reading several grade levels below the assigned content. This study's findings are consistent with the literature review that LRE has created two separate systems: special and general education (Kauffman et al., 2021; Sauer & Jorgensen 2016).

Anastasia, a special education teacher, and Giuliana, a general education teacher, both work at school districts that have implemented a co-teaching model. Both educators presented this change as positive, however; both educators also advocated for a need for more time to collaborate with their co-teacher. Aleta, a general education teacher, noted that they rarely interact with special education teachers and thus have adapted by implementing the same accommodations for all students. Aleta noted this lack of collaboration and support impacts their ability to have a successful inclusive classroom.

General education teacher Aleta pointed out that a hinderance to comprehending LRE is the limited knowledge general education teachers possess about special education. Aleta shared

that as a general education teacher, they were required to take one class in special education. Aleta was able to come up with a definition for LRE, but quickly shared that they did not really know and could not contribute more to that question. Bruno shared that they feel they have no say, as a special education teacher, in the determination of a student's LRE, because administrators have already made those decisions. Bruno also shared that they did not believe educators, as a group, have the same understanding of LRE and thus there is confusion around this topic.

Research Question 3

What professional development experiences have informed Connecticut's certified educators' ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to the least restrictive environment? The final research question of this study sought to determine which professional development experiences have informed Connecticut certified educators' ability to overcome implicit bias as it relates to least restrictive environment. Participants relied on their personal opinions and research to answer this question, as opposed to their experiences in their districts. This is primarily because most participants lacked professional development specifically addressing implicit bias. Participants who received professional development on implicit bias from their district shared that the sessions spanned one school year, with no follow-up work mandated for teachers. One participant shared their experience in implementing district wide professional development into their daily practice. Bill reflected that they were able to continue the work related to culturally responsive classroom in response to how they plan for an environment in which students have access to their education. This is reflective of the 2021 passing of Public Act 21-35, which required school districts to develop a strategic plan to reduce racial disparities in education. In

response to this law, many districts created equity teams as part of their strategic improvement plan (Mirror, 2022).

Anastasia's district had not provided any professional development, but they still shared their response to this question because the lack of professional development had motivated them to pursue their own education on implicit bias and LRE. Anastasia's personal motivation to seek out their own professional development is reflective of the research, which revealed that although there has been an increase in conversations regarding equity and implicit bias in United States education, these conversations do not address implicit bias specific to ability (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2023).

Teachers reported that while their districts had offered limited training related to implicit bias, none had received any training on implicit bias specifically related to special education labels. This was an interesting find, given that the literature review of this study summarized several studies that noted implicit bias related to special education labels of emotional disability (ED) and intellectual disability (ID) (Grindal et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2022,). All participants did not express shared experiences directly related to working with students with ID or ED. The participants who did share their experiences, are noteworthy in this study. Bruno's experience with their district dismantling some self-contained programs and fully integrating students with ID into the general education classrooms has led to lack of instruction, as general education teachers lack the training to modify such assignments. Such a case is supported by the literature review which noted that general educators often lack the skill set to implement programming or modifications for special education students (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). In Bruno's experience, what should have been inclusive, turned out to be segregated.

Additionally, any professional development provided lasted only a year, and all participants indicated that no follow-up work was undertaken. It is important to highlight that many participants in this study, both general and special education teachers, noted that they had sought out their own professional development, and all but one participant noted that they believed it was important for educators to learn and identify their own biases. This underscores the critical need for sustained support and ongoing training to address the complexities of fostering inclusive environments in urban educational settings.

The researcher recruited and interviewed eight participants currently practicing in urban school districts in Connecticut. The emergence of three themes followed the process of re-storying, coding, and analyzing the data. The first theme was: challenges in creating an inclusive environment. The participants noted frustrations with a lack of time to collaborate with teachers to plan for students in an inclusive environment. The second theme was: a lack of guidance and training regarding the LRE. Many of the teachers noted a lack of consistent understanding or implementation of LRE in their districts, while some general education teachers noted having very little instruction or discussion about LRE. The third theme was: a lack of guidance and training regarding implicit bias. This theme revealed participants had a variety of training or lack thereof regarding implicit bias; however, all participants shared that even available district training opportunities did not extend beyond one school year.

Implications

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the role of implicit bias in Connecticut certified educators' perceptions of students' capabilities in relation to the ID and ED associated with LRE. This study aimed to identify biases regarding students with disabilities and examined how these biases influenced their placement in more restrictive settings. The study also

considered the interconnected nature of biases that affect students, known as intersectionality. Such biases (e.g., ability, race, and gender) serve as an obstacle to students with disabilities in the goal to have access to general education for the greatest amount of their school day (Morgan et al., 2023).

This study holds significance as it can furnish districts with insights advocating for professional development addressing implicit bias, particularly focusing on intersectionality, which encompasses student ability, achievement, and placement. Research finds, that once professional development and training are introduced, implicit bias becomes more recognizable and manageable (Perry et. al., 2015; Woods, 2018). The study's findings carry significant implications that could lead to positive outcomes across multiple levels, including addressing professional development needs, enhancing student placement, promoting equity in education, and fostering positive outcomes overall.

Professional Development Needs

Connecticut certified educators, as revealed by this study, have voiced a lack of consistent professional development concerning implicit bias and LRE. Inan-Kaya et al. (2022) assert that implicit bias is present in all classrooms. Some participants were unable to apply their district's professional development to creating an inclusive classroom, free from bias. In this study, many educators saw the value in this training, but have sought it on their own, in the districts' absence. It is important to emphasize that in this study, none of the certified educators received professional development concerning implicit bias and student placement. In essence, the study reveals a lack of training regarding student placement and bias to include student ability level, race and/or gender. This study underscores the necessity for professional development programs tailored to addressing implicit biases, particularly those related to

intersectionality. This may include training sessions aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of biases related to student ability, race, and/or gender. Overall, the implications of this study suggest that targeted efforts to address implicit bias can lead to positive changes in student placement practices and contribute to greater equity and inclusion in education.

Enhancing Student Placement

Research shows that students with educational disability labels of ID and ED are more likely to face bias (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Furthermore, biases related to ability, race and gender have resulted in overrepresentation of students with specific disability categories (Cooc, 2022; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Students with education labels of ID and ED are most likely to be placed in restrictive environments, usually with no access to the general education setting (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Enhancing the placement of students with disabilities in less restrictive educational settings is possible by addressing implicit biases through ongoing targeted professional development. This may also potentially eliminate the two separate systems of education: special education and general education, as identified not only in this study but also in additional literature (Kroesch & Peeples, 2021).

Such initiatives may result in heightened access to general education environments for these students, fostering their overall academic and social development. Jones and Winters (2023) revealed that inclusive environments have positive impacts on all parties involved, including improved social skills, increased engagement, social relationships, higher expectations, higher scores on academic tests, and better post-secondary outcomes. Additionally, research proves that greater access to general education environments, creating inclusive classrooms, would have a positive impact on special education students, general education students and teachers (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Wehmeyer et al., (2021) found that

students with disabilities placed in an inclusive environment outperform students with disabilities placed in a segregated program.

Promoting Equity in Education

The absence of bias identification ability perpetuates overly restrictive placement decisions, impacting students with ID and ED. Woods (2018) emphasized the concept that implicit bias theory posits the presence of unconscious bias in all individuals. Moreover, Inan-Kaya et al., (2022) demonstrated that implicit bias permeates across all classrooms and can manifest in both non-verbal and verbal interactions, such as the duration of academic discourse utilized by educators when interacting with students. Comprehensive professional development for all certified educators is essential in reducing bias in placement decisions. Perry et al. (2015) found that individuals who are aware of their own biases have a higher likelihood of recognizing and understanding the biases of others.

Students with ID and ED are among the most segregated groups of students with disabilities and such segregation of students in self-contained classrooms results in lower graduation and post-secondary employment rates (Grindal et al., 2016). Furthermore, students with ID and ED in segregated settings, are often taught with a modified curriculum, which decreases academic rigor (Grindal et al., 2016; Hanreddy & Ostlund, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). Mitigating biases influencing student placement can facilitate districts in attaining greater equity in education. This may contribute to narrowing achievement gaps and ensuring that all students, regardless of ability or background, have equal opportunities to succeed academically.

Fostering Positive Outcomes

The impact of an inclusive classroom has positive benefits for teachers, paraeducators, special education students and general education students (Jones & Winters, 2023). Students

placed in more restrictive environments demonstrate more behavioral episodes, less instances of self-regulation, and poorer interpersonal skills (Gottfried, 2014), which could be improved with an inclusive model, appropriately supported by ongoing, targeted professional development. Furthermore, districts with more inclusive programming show lower incidences of due process hearings (White et al., 2023). Implementing strategies to address implicit bias has the potential to yield positive outcomes at various levels within the educational system. These outcomes may include improved student outcomes, enhanced school climate, and increased satisfaction among both students and school personnel, all of which are supported by research conducted in the field of education (Bolourian et al., 2018; Jones & Winters, 2023; Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the findings of this research, there are three recommendations. The first recommendation is for school districts to provide on-going professional development related to LRE and implicit bias, to include intersectionality. Wehmeyer et al. (2021) noted that bias lies in personnel training, allocation of funds and resources, school climate, and teacher/administration training and attitudes each of which impact LRE placement decisions. Implicit bias related to racism, along with ableism, influences the identification and subsequent educational placement of students of color (Morgan, 2020). Implicit racial bias predominantly impacts the overidentification of African American male students, leading to their disproportionate labeling for special education services and subsequent placement in specific programs (Chiu et al., 2022). Overrepresentation of race and gender in special education programs with zero percent time with non-disabled peers is a concern of segregation (Marsico, 2021). None of the eight participants shared a cohesive understanding of LRE, nor did any participant confirm that their district and colleagues regularly discussed LRE. Furthermore, participants who had experienced professional

development related to implicit bias, expressed a frustration with the lack of continuous professional development. Many individuals underwent only one instance of professional development related to implicit bias. This study's findings are similar to the literature review, including Home et. al (2019), who found that both general and special education teachers lack comprehensive knowledge of special education law, including LRE.

The second recommendation is for districts to consider common planning time for general and special education teachers. This recommendation finds support in the firsthand experiences of all student participants and the synthesized literature review. All eight participants, special and general education teachers, noted that they have no support or collaboration time with their counterparts. The literature review recognized this as a national concern, emphasizing the presence of two distinct realms within education: one for general education and one for special education (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Providing common planning time for general and special education teachers will allow for special educators to share their skill sets with general educators, so they may generalize those skills in an inclusive classroom. This study is not alone in this recommendation. Tzucker's (2022) analysis recommended the federal government to provide funding for additional training of general education teachers, so that they may acquire the skill sets needed to effectively manage students with disabilities enrolled in general education classrooms. This shared time will also facilitate the presence of general educators in student planning meetings, including those concerning behavioral plans. Anastasis found this aspect particularly frustrating.

The third recommendation is for districts to consider the implementation of a co-teaching model. This was shared by some of the participants of this study but is also included in the literature review. Research shows that inclusive classrooms are beneficial for special education

students, general education staff, and teachers (Bolourian et al., 2018). The former two recommendations were based on the findings in the literature review as well as the lived experiences of the eight participants in this study. Co-taught classes have the potential to mitigate implicit biases tied to differing ability levels. Agran et al. (2002) noted that most special education teachers in their study did not believe that their special education students could be in an inclusive environment. The collaborative planning of instruction, modifications, accommodations, and active co-teaching by both a general and special education teacher could influence this bias. This recommendation is based on the lived experiences of the participants, but also on the synthesized literature in this study. Wehmeyer et al. (2021), Gottfried (2014), and Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) each noted the benefits of an inclusive classroom which include improved social skills, increased engagement, social relationships, higher expectations, higher scores on academic tests, and better post-secondary outcomes. Moreover, their research unveiled the positive effects on both students with and without disabilities, as well as staff members.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the lived experiences of certified educators in urban districts in Connecticut, revealing challenges related to LRE and implicit bias. Eight certified educators participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews via Zoom Video Communications. Interviews were transcribed, re-storied, and member checked. After member checking was complete, the researcher manually coded the re-storied narratives and three themes emerged: (a) challenges in creating an inclusive environment, (s) lack of guidance and training related to LRE, and (c) lack of guidance and training related to implicit bias.

This study underscores the critical need for ongoing research in this area, as implicit bias and disparities in special education labeling and placement are nation issues (Kroesch & Peeples,

2021; Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Urgent action is required to address the identified gaps in professional development, particularly in implicit bias training with an intersectional approach encompassing student disability labels and placement considerations. The findings from both the literature review and the participants' lived experiences demonstrate that recognizing one's biases illuminates a shift in practice, along with the capacity to identify such biases in others (Perry et al., 2015). Furthermore, this study supports the need for districts to adapt co-teaching models in their classrooms to support the need for common planning time and instruction for the general and special educators. Such actions will mitigate the disparity between special and general teacher skill set, which ultimately impacts the success of an inclusive environment (Kauffman et al., 2021; Sauer & Jorgensen 2016). These recommendations are not only corroborated by the findings of this study but also congruent with existing literature in the field.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	September 24, 2023
IRB Project #:	0923-17
Title of Project:	Implicit Bias and Least Restrictive Environment: Perceptions of Certified Educators
Principal Investigator (PI):	Christen Papallo
PI Contact Information:	cpapallo@une.edu 860-205-5533

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of the experiences of certified educators’ perceptions of implicit bias as it relates to students’ Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This project will include 8 participants and is being conducted as part of the principal investigator’s dissertation.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are:

- Age 18 or older
- Hold current employment in a Connecticut urban school district,
- Hold a certification in one of the following areas; special or general education teacher (PreK-12)

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately one hour over Zoom.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your re-storied narrative to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond or the principal investigator will assume that you have no comments and the re-storied narrative will be assumed accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand how implicit bias, related to special education students, as well as the impact such bias may have on the implementation of LRE.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- Data will only be collected during one-on-one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without your consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by you for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the re-storied narrative.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during the Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your re-storied narrative the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all re-storied narratives have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password-protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the Master List is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX B

Implicit Bias and Least Restrictive Environment: Perceptions of Certified Educators

Research Proposal Summary

Dear Educator,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled Implicit Bias and Least Restrictive Environment: Perceptions of Certified Educators for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of certified educators' perceptions of implicit bias as it relates to Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). I am seeking 8 participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:

- Over 18 years old
- current employment in a Connecticut school district,
- a certification in one of the following areas; special or general education teacher (PreK-12).

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than 8 people who express interest, only the first 8 will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience, please contact me via email at cpapallo@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Kindly,

Christen Papallo
Doctoral Student
University of New England

APPENDIX C

IMPLICIT BIAS AND LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF
CERTIFIED EDUCATORS

Interview Question: 1 Can you tell me a little bit about your background in teaching?

Interview Question 1a) What is/are your certification(s)?

Interview Question 1b) Why did you enter the field?

Interview Question 2: To what extent do you work with students who receive special education services?

Interview Question 2a: To what extent do you work with students with special education labels of intellectual or emotional disabilities?

Interview Question 2b: Can you describe your experience in IEP meetings that discuss labels of intellectual and/or emotional disabilities?

Interview Question 3: Could you share your understanding of the term "least restrictive environment" within the context of special education?

Interview Question 3a: How do you believe this term influences your interactions with students of varying abilities?

Interview Question 4: Implicit bias can impact our perceptions and decisions without conscious awareness. In your experience, can you provide an example of a situation where implicit bias may have influenced your perception of a student's suitability for a least restrictive environment?

Interview Question 4a: Follow-up: How did this influence manifest, and what steps did you take to mitigate its effects?

Interview Question 5: When considering students with intellectual and emotional disabilities, how do you approach creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment that aligns with the concept of the least restrictive environment?

Interview Question 5a: Follow-up: Are there any specific challenges you've encountered, and how have you addressed them?

Interview Question 6: Reflecting on your professional development and training, have there been any instances where you've received guidance on recognizing and addressing implicit bias?

Interview Question 6a: Follow-up: How has this guidance shaped your interactions with students, particularly in relation to their placement within the least restrictive environment?

Interview Question 7: As an educator, your role is crucial in fostering an unbiased and inclusive learning environment. How do you believe your awareness of implicit bias can contribute to improving your students' experiences within the least restrictive environment?

Interview Question 7a: Follow-up: Can you provide insights into any strategies or practices you've implemented to counteract potential bias?