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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE AT POST-SECONDARY  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy

By

Abraham B. de Villiers

October, 2016

Robert Barner, Ph. D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Abraham Barend de Villiers

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Doctoral Committee:

Robert Barner, Ph.D. Chairperson

Jennifer Rumack, Ed.D.

Jacqueline Sanderlin, Ed.D.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| LIST OF TABLES .....                       | v    |
| DEDICATION .....                           | vii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                     | viii |
| VITA .....                                 | ix   |
| ABSTRACT .....                             | x    |
| Chapter 1: Introduction .....              | 1    |
| Background of the Study .....              | 1    |
| Statement of the Problem .....             | 9    |
| Purpose and Nature of the Study .....      | 10   |
| Importance of the Study .....              | 10   |
| Operational Definitions and Key Terms..... | 12   |
| Theoretical Framework .....                | 16   |
| Research Question .....                    | 17   |
| Limitations of the Study .....             | 17   |
| Delimitations of the Study.....            | 18   |
| Assumptions .....                          | 18   |
| Organization of the Study.....             | 19   |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review .....         | 20   |
| Theoretical Framework .....                | 21   |
| Empirical Research Summary .....           | 31   |
| Chapter Summary .....                      | 45   |
| Chapter 3: Methodology .....               | 49   |

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| Research Design and Rationale .....                                      | 49   |
| Setting.....   | 51   |
| Populations, Sample, and Sampling Procedures .....                       | 53   |
| Human Subject Considerations .....                                       | 55   |
| Instrumentation.....   | 57   |
| Data Collection and Data Management Procedures.....                      | 60   |
| Data Analysis and Reporting.....   | 63   |
| Design Credibility/Trustworthiness and Limitations .....                 | 63   |
| Positionality.....   | 64   |
| Chapter 4: Results .....   | 66   |
| Introduction .....   | 66   |
| Presentation of Findings .....   | 67   |
| Chapter Summary .....  | 104  |
| Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations..... | 108  |
| Introduction .....   | 108  |
| Discussion of Key Findings .....   | 112  |
| Conclusions .....  | 129  |
| Implications for Policy and Practice .....                               | 133  |
| Recommendations for Further Research .....                               | 135  |
| Chapter Summary .....  | 137  |
| REFERENCES .....   | 142  |
| APPENDIX A: Email to Potential Participant.....                          | 160  |
| APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form .....                                  | 161  |
| APPENDIX C: Notice of Approval for Human Research.....                   | 164  |

## LIST OF TABLES

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| Table 1. Differences between Secondary Education and Post-Secondary Education Services Available to Special Education Students.....                               | 3    |
| Table 2. Positivist vs. Post-Positivist Educational Research Paradigms .....  | 22   |
| Table 3. Demographic Information of high school General Education Teachers in an Urban Charter School Organization .....  | 53   |
| Table 4. Connecting Research Questions to Interview Questions .....   | 58   |
| Table 5. Teacher Participant Interview Responses, Key Words, and Statements .....   | 67   |
| Table 6. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Teaching Style Competencies .....   | 75   |
| Table 7. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Special Education Student Competencies .....  | 76   |
| Table 8. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Qualities of a Successful Teacher .....   | 76   |
| Table 9. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Attend a Post-Secondary Institution.....       | 76   |
| Table 10. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Not Attend a Post-Secondary Institution ..... | 77   |
| Table 11. Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to How the Organization can Help General Education Teachers .....                               | 77   |
| Table 12. Collective Emerging Themes.....   | 77   |
| Table 13. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Flexibility .....  | 78   |
| Table 14. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Care .....   | 80   |
| Table 15. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Teacher Belief in Student .....  | 82   |
| Table 16. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Collaboration, Communication, and Training .....   | 84   |

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| Table 17. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Student Self-Belief and Self-Confidence .....                     | 87   |
| Table 18. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Student Self-Advocacy .....                                       | 89   |
| Table 19. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Encouragement .....   | 90   |
| Table 20. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Support from School and Family.                                   | 92   |
| Table 21. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Relationships .....   | 95   |
| Table 22. General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Future Goals of Student .....                                     | 97   |
| Table 23. Responses to Classification(s) of Special Education Students Previously and Currently Taught.....                | 100  |
| Table 24. Responses to Special Education Students Attending Post-Secondary Institutions after High School Graduation ..... | 101  |



## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. Without their love and support I would not have been able to complete this arduous journey.

To my wife, Kelly. Thank you for editing my papers at the last minute, urging me to keep going when things got difficult, and looking after the girls while I was away for long weekends. We certainly did this together!

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## VITA

Abraham de Villiers

EDUCATION

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA<br><i>Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Administration, &amp; Policy</i> | 2016 |
| California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA<br><i>M.A. in Educational Administration</i>      | 2012 |
| University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY<br><i>B.S. in Animal Science</i>                                    | 2007 |

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| Principal<br><i>Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy, Los Angeles, CA</i>                 | 2014 – Present |
| Assistant Principal<br><i>Alain LeRoy Locke College Preparatory Academy, Los Angeles, CA</i> | 2012 – 2014    |
| Science Teacher<br><i>Bell High School, Bell, CA</i>   | 2007 – 2012    |

PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS

|   |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| Administrative Services Credential                          | Cleared in 2015 |
| Single Subject Teaching Credential in Biology and Chemistry | Cleared in 2012 |

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative, phenomenological study will cross-sectionally examine the perceptions of general education teachers through in-person interviews to analyze their personal beliefs for special education students' attendance at post-secondary education institutions. Data was collected from general education teachers working at different urban high schools in a Southern California charter management organization. Each of the interviewed teachers are currently responsible, or have been responsible, for the instruction of special education students in their classroom. A total of 6 general education teachers participated in semi-structured interviews that consisted of 10 open-ended questions. Three conclusions were extracted from the findings related to the data collected through the interview process. Firstly, the general education teacher must believe in the potential of the special education student and their ability to attend a post-secondary education institution. Secondly, the school and the charter management organization must provide adequate training and collaboration opportunities to general education teachers in order to provide them with the pedagogical skills necessary to appropriately support special education students. Thirdly, the special education student must have the self-belief and the self-confidence required to attend a post-secondary education institution after high school graduation. The 3 implications supported by the key findings and conclusions from the study are to explore methods by which general education teachers might better communicate their belief in the potential of all special education students, devise systems in which more meaningful collaboration, communication, and training of general education teachers to instruct special education students can occur, and investigate strategies that general education teachers might implement to improve the self-belief and self-confidence of special education students.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

**Individuals with disabilities education act.** In late 1990, President George Bush signed into law the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA regulates how school districts provide special education, early intervention, and related services to children with disabilities. In 1997 IDEA was amended to mandate that a child count of special education students within each state should be conducted to collect data on race and ethnicity starting in the 1998-1999 school year. This data was then compiled and sorted by the U.S. Department of Education (2005) for all children with disabilities between the ages of 6-21. According to this report, 4.27% of White children were identified as having a learning disability; corresponding figures for other race/ethnicity groups were as follows: American Indian/Alaska native, 6.29%; Black, 5.67%; Hispanic, 4.97%; and Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.7% (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002).

In 2001, President George Bush's son, George W. Bush, signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law. Together, IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002), stressed increased student academic outcomes. Due to the requirements within these laws, there is a greater emphasis on teachers using data to ensure students are making adequate progress. Through individualized education programs (IEPs), students with disabilities have always had their academic and behavioral goals monitored through the use of data by special education teachers. Pierangelo and Giuliani (2006) believe, however, that IDEA (2004) requires a "renewed emphasis on ensuring that children with disabilities are actually learning" (p. 396). This learning is more likely to take place because the academic goals in the IEP must now be connected to the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004).

Although college and university attendance for special education students is not one of the pillars of IDEA (2004), it is an expected result from the increased attention and funds focused on these high-needs students (“Topic: Secondary Transition,” 2007). As a result of IDEA (2004), educators in districts and schools all over the country are receiving more money and professional development for improving educational practices designed for special education students in the history of the law. In 2014 alone, over \$11 billion dollars in federal funds were provided to states and local school districts for special education (“Welcome to IDEAMoney Watch,” 2014).

IDEA (2004) safeguards students with learning disabilities in the educational system by mandating that school districts create programs and services in order to better service these students. A major emphasis of these programs is the initiative to educate students with learning disabilities in the same classroom as students without learning disabilities. This service is referred to as a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). During school, the services that students might receive, as it relates to special education, revolve around the progress towards both academic and behavioral goals. In order to provide adequate services to students with disabilities, create goals that are meaningful, and implement the student’s IEP, students are assisted by a multi-faceted team comprised of a number of individuals including, but not limited to, their teachers, their counselor, a school administrator, a school psychologist, speech and behavior therapists, their guardians, and themselves. Faculty and staff, including the school psychologist, and school administrators, implement the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and specialized instruction after the IEP meeting is held (Hadley, 2011). The specific mandates and regulations in IDEA (2004) do not extend past secondary school. This means that for students with disabilities who have a desire to attend a post-secondary education institution, and who have been receiving a multitude of supports within the high school setting,

will no longer benefit from that same support at a university or college that may be infinitely more challenging, both academically and behaviorally, than what they encountered during their high school experience. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 do provide some level of support to students with disabilities enrolled at a post-secondary education institute. College students, however, are responsible for asking to receive services at post-secondary education institutions (Hadley, 2011). As IDEA (1990) speeds toward the end of its third decade of implementation, new questions are beginning to arise that require immediate attention. Although there is a higher rate of college attendance by special education students, Oesterreich and Knight (2008) have noted that there is currently an underrepresentation in college attendance of special education students. The research suggests that while there are more students with learning disabilities attending post-secondary education institutions than ever before, there could be even more students with learning disabilities at post-secondary education institutions if they identified themselves on campus in order to get the services they deserve.

Table 1 identifies the different services and supports available to students with learning disabilities in secondary and post-secondary education. It is clear from this information that there is a high degree of disparity between the resources students at the secondary level receive in comparison to the resources the same students receive at the post-secondary level. a

Table 1

*Differences between Secondary Education and Post-Secondary Education Services Available to Special Education Students*

|                          | Secondary Education  | Post-secondary Education  |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Governed by federal laws | Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990); Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of | Section 504 (particularly subpart E) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; |

(continued)

|                    | Secondary Education  | Post-secondary Education  |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Purpose            | <p>1973; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).</p> <p>To ensure that all eligible students with disabilities have available a free appropriate public education (FAPE), including special education and related services (IDEA, 1990). To ensure that no otherwise qualified person with a disability be denied access to, or the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination by any program or activity provided by any public institution or entity.</p> | <p>the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).</p> <p>To ensure that no otherwise qualified person with a disability be denied access to, or the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination by any program or activity provided by any public institution or entity.</p> |
| Eligibility        | (for special education services) All infants, children, and youth (0 through 21 years) with disabilities (as defined by the state Administrative Rules for Special Education, and/or the ADA).   | (for disability services) Anyone who meets the entry level-age criteria of the college and who can document the existence of a disability as defined by the 504 ADA.  |
| Documentation      | School districts are responsible for providing trained personnel to assess eligibility and plan educational services.  | Students are responsible for obtaining disability documentation from a professional who is qualified to assess their particular disability.   |
| Receiving Services | School districts are responsible for identifying students with disabilities, designing special instruction, and/or providing accommodations.   | Students are responsible for obtaining disability documentation from a professional who is qualified to assess their particular disability.   |
| Self-Advocacy      | Students with disabilities learn about their disability, the importance of self-advocacy, the accommodations they need, and how to be a competent self-advocate.   | Students must be able to describe their disability, identify strengths and weaknesses, and identify any accommodations needed and how to be a competent self-advocate.  |



**The importance of teacher beliefs.** Teachers have the opportunity to influence the lives of countless people throughout their careers. Research has shown that teachers' lived experiences, their perceptions of the world, and their belief systems impact their understanding of the content material and the strategies that they use in their classroom (Romanowski, 1997). How teachers perceive their students, both academically and behaviorally, plays an incredibly important role in how teachers ultimately educate their students. Ample evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Christenson & Ysseldyke, 1989; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). How might an individual student's performance be effected on academic assessments if every teacher expected that student to fail? Conversely, how might an individual student's academic performance, in general, be effected if every teacher expected that student to graduate and attend university?

Romanowski (1997) believes that each teacher has an individual belief system. This system functions as a method for the teacher to categorize how they make meaning of their role as a teacher. A teacher's individual belief system influences all of their decisions that are related to education including how to grade assignments, how to manage classrooms, and how to create curriculum. This belief system is integrated in every class period of every day throughout every year that the teacher remains in education. Every student that ever sets foot in a specific teacher's classroom is subject to that teacher's beliefs, perceptions, biases, and expectations that have been unearthed by their own lived experiences. Teachers, just through the attitude they display toward their students, wield an incredible amount of influence that might make or break the academic trajectory of many students over the course of a career.

Teacher belief systems, as a whole, play an important role in the education of all students. However, it is important to understand that an individual's belief system might be altered for different subgroups of students. What are some ways that teacher belief systems might change if a question pertains to African-American students, or Hispanic students, or English Learners, or Special Education students? Several studies have found a connection between teachers' attitudes and the instructional effort that they direct towards students with diverse learning and behavioral characteristics (Brophy, 1986; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Good & Brophy, 1972; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). The process by which teachers' goals and expectations affect the performance of students with disabilities is further clarified by research on teacher efficacy (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Bandura (1997) believes that levels of self-efficacy, or how much a person believes they will have success when performing a task, can show how motivated someone might be and also how they might behave in certain areas of life. People are more likely to exert energy and consistently persist through difficult tasks and challenges when they believe their actions will result in preferred results (Bandura, 1986; Soto & Goetz, 1998). As it relates to education, teachers who believe they have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to try new pedagogical strategies that result in improved instruction (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007).

Teachers who have a high level of self-efficacy tend to show several successful methods of instructional practice like handling classroom behavior more efficiently, exercising more effort in creating and presenting their lessons, setting advanced expectations for their teaching, and engaging students in classroom activities more frequently compared to teachers with low self-efficacy (Allinder, 1994; Chwalitsz, Altameyer, & Russel, 1992; Ross, 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). Furthermore, in comparison to teachers with low self-efficacy,

teachers with higher levels of confidence in their own practice often are more likely to apply new learning gained in training and professional development (Morrison, Walker, Wakefield, and Solberg, 1994). Research has found that teachers with low-self efficacy become more frustrated with students that are not meeting academic expectations and following behavioral directions. These teachers are also more likely to criticize their students when they make mistakes (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990).

**Urban school districts.** Urban school districts are characterized by high rates of poverty, high rates of minority students, high rates of students participating in free and reduced lunch programs, and high rates of services received under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. On standardized tests, students in urban school districts score lower, on average, than students in suburban school districts (Jacob, 2007). Putnam (2000) argues that poor “social capital” (p. 11) – the unofficial networks within a community that provides support to people within that community – is generally more evident in inner-city neighborhoods. This often results in urban and suburban schools having a great disparity of resources available to students and teachers (Jacobs, 2007).

There has been extensive research on the discrepancy between the qualities of education received by students in urban areas versus students in suburban areas (Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002; Larson-Billings, 1995; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2001; Williams, 1996). Minority students generally attend schools in urban areas. These schools usually have less resources but greater enrollments than their suburban counterparts. In the larger urban school districts, administrators have far greater control of curriculum decisions than do teachers (Howey, 2002). Urban school districts have a much more diverse population of students, and Darling-Hammond (1997) believes that if urban school

districts do not adjust their curriculum and pedagogy to factor in the needs and lived experiences of urban learners, their schools will continue to become even less effective.

It has been found that over 85% of prospective teachers participating in a study about teacher education state that they would prefer not to teach in urban areas (Zimpher, 1989). Additionally, and incredibly detrimental to the long lasting effects of stability within education, researchers have found that almost half of all new teachers who start their career in urban school districts leave within three to five years (Howey, 2002). Research has also shown that urban schools have low skilled teachers that are underprepared and have low expectations for their students (Lankford et al., 2002). Children from urban settings who desperately need teachers that are both highly proficient and exceptionally compassionate receive their education in an environment that is most difficult to attract these types of educators (Sharpton, Casbergue & Cafide, 2002).

**Teacher beliefs of urban students.** As general education teachers become more involved with the education of special education students, it is important to delve deeper into their expectations and beliefs for these students. Before doing so, however, it is essential to consider the beliefs and expectations teachers have for general education students in an urban setting.

Sharpton et al. (2002) found that poverty rates for children have increased considerably, and the large majority of the growth has been found in large urban areas around the country. The need for an excellent education for all students, particularly those in urban areas, has been a topic of debate for quite some time. Yet, for many years, educators and policy makers have struggled to adequately tackle the poor academic standing of school-age children in urban environments and the overall achievement gap between students in urban and suburban areas. As educational

professionals grapple with the demands of this perpetually expanding achievement gap, research shows that students in suburban areas perform at a basic proficiency level at 50% more frequency than students in urban areas in the United States (Lankford et al., 2002).

One possible reason for low performance levels is the expectations teachers have for the students. Kett (1977) believed that minority students fail to live up to teacher expectations and find themselves at an immediate disadvantage. Research shows that teachers in urban areas have held their students to low expectations. Furthermore, these teachers have then used grades and tests scores to make judgements on students' academic and behavioral potential (R. Ferguson., 2003). Urban teachers do not believe that their students are capable of mastering the necessary critical-thinking skills needed to access general curriculum, and that this might be due to these students entering school with low-level and deficient academic language and vocabulary (Song & Christiansen, 2001).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Studies have shown that as little as 10% of special education students are attending post-secondary institutions (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). These findings suggest that college readiness might be beyond special education students (Conley, 2007). The mission of a charter management organization in Southern California is to prepare all students, both general education and special education, for college, leadership, and life. Through the increase in funding and an improvement in access to resources, special education students that attend schools within the charter management organization receive an incredibly thorough and rigorous education that should prepare them for attendance at any post-secondary education institution.

General education teachers are responsible for teaching special education students in what is known as the least restrictive environment. The charter management organization has prided itself on providing extensive professional development workshops and training to all general education teachers on the topic of educating students that receive special education services. Extensive research also shows that teachers' goals and expectations affect the performance of all students, including those with disabilities (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). However, no inquiry has yet to take place that would investigate the goals and expectations of specifically general education teachers as it relates to special education students and their attendance at post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school. Therefore, both a need and an opportunity exists to research the perceptions of general education teachers in an urban charter high school as it pertains to attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students.

### **Purpose and Nature of the Study**

The overall purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. This qualitative, phenomenological study will cross-sectionally examine the perceptions of general education teachers through in-person interviews to analyze their personal beliefs for special education students' attendance at post-secondary education institutions.

### **Importance of the Study**

This study is important because special education students in an inclusion setting are receiving the vast majority of their instruction from general education teachers. Of these students, only a fraction of them are attending post-secondary institutions (Wagner, et al. 2005).

It is reasonably expected that the experience of general education teachers as it relates to the instruction of special education students is incredibly diverse across different school settings. Exploring the beliefs and perceptions of general education teachers as it pertains to the attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students might benefit school districts as they look to continue to improve the professional development that they provide general education teachers. The additional information generated by this study might encourage school sites and districts to consider how to navigate the various biases that general education teachers might display in their answers to interview questions.

Educators will benefit from the outcome of this study as it might better inform their own biases in relation to special education students. Outcomes might be applied in professional development sessions about cultural awareness. Special education students might benefit from this study because general education teachers are more aware of their biases. A study on this particular topic might also be extremely absorbing because of the large amount of resources both schools and districts provide in order to better train general education teachers to more effectively instruct special education students.

There is a gap in the research addressing the beliefs and expectations of general education teachers as it pertains to the future college attendance of the special education students they teach. Outcomes of this study may enhance the current literature focusing on general education teacher beliefs of future post-secondary education institution attendance by special education students. The study will provide valuable data about perceptions, which might help to explain some of the external data about special education students and college attendance. The study will provide an insight into how general education teachers think, and as funding for special education continues to increase timing is right.

## Operational Definitions and Key Terms

Throughout this study, the following terminology was used frequently

- *Accommodations* – Changes that allow a person with a disability to participate fully in an activity. Examples include, extended time, different test format, and alterations to a classroom. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Care* – A teacher’s genuine compassion, empathy, concern and interest in the emotional and physical well-being of a student.
- *Common Core Standards* – A shared set of evidence based national standards developed through state led initiatives. Common Core is designed to have fewer, simplified standards. They were created by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. Officials from 48 states participated in the process to develop the standards over several years. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Cumulative Files* – The records maintained by the local school district for any child enrolled in school. The file may contain evaluations and information about a child’s disability and placement. It also contains grades and the results of standardized assessments. Parents have the right to inspect these files at any time. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Disability* – Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Flexibility* – A teacher’s willingness to change, compromise, or modify their own instructional planning, or to implement pedagogical strategies for the benefit of special education students.



- *Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* – Special education and related services are provided at public expense, without charge to the parents. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *General Education Teacher* – Refers to a certificated member of faculty that holds a single subject teaching credential in any content area (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Inclusion* – Term used to describe services that place students with disabilities in general education classrooms with appropriate support services. Student may receive instruction from both a general education teacher and a special education teacher. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004)* – The original legislation was written in 1975 guaranteeing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education and the right to be educated with their non-disabled peers. Congress has reauthorized this federal law. The most recent revision occurred in 2004. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* – Special education term outlined by IDEA (1990) to define the written document that states the disabled child's goals, objectives and services for students receiving special education. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Individualized Education Program Team* – Term used to describe the committee of parents, teachers, administrators and school personnel that provides services to the student. The committee may also include medical professional and other relevant parties. The team reviews assessment results, determines goals and objectives and program placement for the child needing services. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)

- *Individualized Transition Plan (ITP)* – This plan starts at age 14 and addresses areas of post-school activities, post-secondary education, employment, community experiences and daily living skills. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* – The placement of a special needs student in a manner promoting the maximum possible interaction with the general school population. Placement options are offered on a continuum including regular classroom with no support services, regular classroom with support services, designated instruction services, special day classes and private special education programs. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Mainstreaming* – Term used to describe the integration of children with special needs into regular classrooms for part of the school day. The remainder of the day is in a special education classroom. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Post-Secondary Education* – The provision of a formal instructional program whose curriculum is designed primarily for students who are beyond the compulsory age for high school. This includes programs whose purpose is academic, vocational, and continuing professional education, and excludes avocational and adult basic education programs. (The Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs)  
<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/Glossary.aspx>)
- *Post-Secondary Education Institution* – An institution which has as its sole purpose or one of its primary missions, the provision of postsecondary education. Refers to any educational institution after high school, with the exception of a military institution, that requires a high school diploma. This might be vocational school, a 2-year community college, or a 4-year university. (<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/Glossary.aspx>)

- *Resource Specialists* – Provide instructional planning and support and direct services to students who needs have been identified in an IEP and are assigned to general education classrooms for the majority of their school day. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Resource Specialist Program (RSP)* – Term used to describe a program that provides instruction, materials and support services to students with identified disabilities who are assigned to general classroom for more than 50% of their school day. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *School Psychologist* – Assist in the identification of intellectual, social and emotional needs of students. They provide consultation and support to families and staff regarding behavior and conditions related to learning. They plan programs to meet the special needs of children and often serve as a facilitator during an IEP meeting. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Special Education Student* – Refers to any student receiving special education services at a school within the urban charter school organization. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Specific Learning Disability* – Special education term used to define a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language spoken or written that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical equations. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)
- *Special Day Class (SDC)* – Term used to describe a self-contained special education class which provides services to students with intensive needs that cannot be met by the general education program, RSP or DIS program. Classes consist of more than 50% of the student’s day. (“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)

- *Transition IEP* – IDEA (1990) mandates that at age 16, the IEP must include a statement about transition including goals for post-secondary activities and the services needed to achieve these goals. This is referred to an Individual Transition Plan or (ITP).  
(“Understanding Special Education,” 2009)

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that will guide this study is post-positivism. Post-positivism materialized in the 1950s and 1960s (Hanson, 1958; Popper, 1959). Researchers who conduct studies from the post-positivism lens believe that it represents a dichotomy that allows them to believe that truth is made and that studies are persuaded by the principles of the researchers. Simultaneously, they think that an objectively consistent relationship among study variables can exist. Nonetheless, advocates of post-positivism stress deductive reasoning with the majority of their research being swayed by various theories and hypotheses (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In conjunction with teacher belief systems, the theory of post-positivism suggests that through past observations, questions posed, and disposition throughout the interviews investigators might influence how the interviewees respond to questions asked. Researchers understand that different respondents might yield a variety of viewpoints instead of a single truth. Post-positivists fully believe in thorough data collection and data analysis (McKee, 2011).

As it relates to teacher belief systems, the theory of post-positivism postulates that the researcher, through lived experiences, questions asked, and demeanor during interviews might somehow affect the answers of those that are being researched. This is true even though the framework suggests that researchers understand there are multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality. Furthermore, it is important to know that, like many other

research theories, post- positivists believe in rigorous methods of data collection and multiple levels of data analysis.

### **Research Question**

The following research question will guide this study:

- What are the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of special education students?

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to the number of participants willing to participate in the study. A small sample size of participants were interviewed and limited to only general education teachers that work at high schools within a specific public charter school organization. General education teachers must have experience teaching students that receive special education services. The public charter school organization operates both middle and high schools within a large urban area in Southern California. However, only general education teachers employed at high schools will be considered for participation. The desired sample size will be six general education teachers and this may not completely represent the target population. Another limitation to this study is the openness, honesty, and the ability of each participant to be able to accurately describe their experiences in relation to the interview questions. Lastly, the study is also limited to a specific time frame of data collection early in the spring semester of the 2015-2016 academic year in order to complete the study by late in the spring semester of the 2015-2016 academic year.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This research study is delimited to one urban charter school organization in Southern California. The researcher made this decision because the urban charter school organization prides itself on preparing all students, including those that receive special education services, for college attendance. Additionally, the study is delimited to general education teachers who have taught, or currently teach, special education students in an inclusive setting within the urban charter school organization. As such, special education teachers will not participate in this study because they have a much more in depth relationship with special education students and pedagogical strategies that might benefit the students as it relates to them graduating and attending a post-secondary institution. A qualitative method of research has been chosen for this study, particularly through the use interview questions, because it allows for the researcher to ask a series of open-ended questions that examine the lived experiences of the participants. Participants might provide a wide range of responses that will allow for an adequate amount of data to be collected about beliefs of special education students' ability to attend post-secondary education institutions.

### **Assumptions**

1. Academic and demographic information provided by the urban charter school organization for all participants in this study, both general education teachers and special education students, will be accurate.
2. Participants in this study will respond openly and honestly to all interview questions and communicate their perspectives as accurately as possible.

3. Improving the awareness of general education teachers beliefs and expectations as it pertains to the future attendance at post-secondary institutions for special education students would be of positive value to participants
4. Participants are knowledgeable about the Special Education population in their classrooms
5. Participants are knowledgeable about appropriate strategies to differentiate curriculum for Special Education students

### **Organization of the Study**

This research study is presented in five chapters. The first chapter introduced the study by providing background information, the statement of the problem, the purpose statement, practical and theoretical significance, and the guiding research question. Chapter 1 also describes some of the history of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, research on the importance of teacher beliefs and expectations, student performance in urban school districts, and teacher beliefs of urban students. Chapter 2 provides a description of the theoretical framework that will be used as a lens to examine the beliefs of general education teachers as it pertains to future attendance at post-secondary institutions by special education students. Furthermore, Chapter 2 delves deeper into the perceptions of special education students through the lens of post-secondary education institutions, teachers, and the students themselves. Chapter 3 describes the research design, participants, data collection, instrumentation, analysis, protection of human subjects, and timeline of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, specifically the themes that emerged from the interviews with each participant. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the entire study, discussion of key findings, and the conclusions, implications, and the recommendations from the study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Approximately 12% of all the students in the urban charter school organization of this study are receiving services as special education students in an inclusive setting. This means that, on a daily basis, over 1,300 students are learning in a general education classroom and being taught by a general education teacher. As general education teachers continue to strive for a greater array of pedagogical strategies necessary to provide special education students with the excellent education they deserve, it is important to note the various challenges educators face in an urban setting. Students in urban settings tend to have low levels of achievement and resources, and high levels of poverty and unemployment. Minority students make up the vast majority of the population in these settings. The researcher, by conducting this study, will examine the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of general education teachers as it relates to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of special education students. This study consisted of two variables: (a) placement at post-secondary education institutions of urban charter high school special education students, (b) confidence of general education urban charter high school teachers in the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of urban charter high school special education students.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature related to perceptions of special education students. This chapter is divided into five parts: (a) the theoretical framework that will guide this study including post-positivism, the model of differentiated expectations, social cognitive theory, tolerance theory, and the attribution theory, (b) post-secondary education institution perceptions of special education students, (c) the self-perception of special education students, and (d) general education teachers' perception of special education students and inclusion.



## Theoretical Framework

The theory of post-positivity stipulates that purely non-biased learning is virtually impossible, as the nature of learning is by definition value based and partisan (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Information requires no explicit verification when logic or context are reasonably appropriate. For example, a person can be cold and wish to put on a jacket. The context, action, and reaction are reasonable and logical, and should require no further validation. Conversely, the flexibility of post-positivity allows that observations are flexible, and fluidity within context is appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phillips and Burbules (2000) believe that researchers who are committed to the advancement of education, both in policy and in practice, should seek knowledge. Ultimately, they urge researchers to advance knowledge by either finding an answer to a question that was previously accepted but is now mistaken, or failing to find an answer completely. Either way, researchers have engaged in a pursuit of knowledge. They wrote:

Questing for truth and knowledge about important matters may end in failure, but to give up the quest is knowingly to settle for beliefs that will almost certainly be defective. And there is this strong incentive to keep the quest alive: if we keep trying, we will eventually discover whether or not the beliefs we have accepted are defective, for the quest for knowledge is to a considerable extent “self-corrective.” (p. 3)

Post-positivism stipulates that cause and effect exist separately, and therefore measuring a cause-and-effect in learning is both impossible and irrelevant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This theoretical framework, through a non-foundationalist approach to human knowledge, denies the perspective that knowledge is based on solid foundations (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Post-positivists welcome the idea of fallibilism. Fallibilism is the philosophical principle that human beings could be wrong about their beliefs, expectations, or their understanding of the world, and yet still be justified in holding their incorrect beliefs (Reed, 2002). As all post-positivists accept that all observations and measurements are subject to fallibility, they understand that all such

observations and measurements must be conducted multiple times. This might result in a variety of types of error that can only be rectified through the use of triangulation on the derivation of each error (Trochim, 2006).

The theory of post-positivism is a departure from positivism in that theorists believe the assertion that knowledge exists in the context of variable realities, not a singular, universally accepted “reality” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). Positivists simply believe that the ultimate goal of knowledge is to be able to characterize, or explain, any phenomena that may be experienced. The theory of positivism is one that adheres to what can be measured and what can be observed. Philosophers who practiced positivism liked to only test theories using the scientific method approach. These scientists would test theories, and if what was learned through the tests and studies did not adequately meet the facts, then a revised theory would have to be created in order to attain an improved anticipation of reality. Empiricism, the belief that measurement, observation, and conclusion is the basis of all scientific effort is a key acceptance of positivists. (Trochim, 2006).

Table 2

*Positivist vs. Post-Positivist Educational Research Paradigms*

| Descriptive                          | Positivist  | Post-Positivist  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Synonym                              | Verify  | Predict  |
| Ontology<br><i>What is Real?</i>     | Objectivist; findings=truth, realism  | Modified objectivist; findings probably true, transcendental realism |
| Epistemology<br><i>What is True?</i> | The only knowledge is scientific knowledge – which is truth, reality is apprehensible | Findings approximate truth, reality is never fully apprehended       |

(continued)

| Descriptive  | Positivist   | Post-Positivist  |
|--|--|--|
| Methodology<br><i>How to examine<br/>what is real?</i> | Quantitative – Primarily<br>experimental, quasi-<br>experimental | Usually Quantitative – Experimental with<br>threats to validity, Qualitative (e.g.,<br>interviews) |

The philosophy of critical realism is a familiar form of post-positivism that maintains that there is a reality separate to how people think about that reality that science can investigate. This is why post-positivists understand the importance of fallibility, and believe that all theories must be possible to amend if needed. Critical realists are critical of the capacity that people have to know, or predict, realism with complete confidence. There is an expectation of bias in post-positivism, particularly between researchers and subject. The assumption is that in any human interaction there is a reflection of personal value being communicated, and is thus learning between subject and a researcher is inherently biased. These biases are influenced by worldviews and lived experiences. This assumption of bias requires that all explanations for situations exist in similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, post-positivism generally relies on the idea of constructivism that maintains that each person creates their own worldview through their lived experiences and their perceptions thereof. Marrying the acceptance of fallibility in perceptions and observations with constructionism suggests that the views of the world that are created must be imperfect. The theory of post-positivism, and those that practice it, believe that attaining true objectivity is impossible. Post-positivists do not believe that people can see the world entirely as it is in reality. As such, objectivity can only be acquired through the practice of triangulation of measurements and observations that have already been identified as being fallible.

Karl Popper (1902-1994), a proponent of post-positivism, believed that knowledge evolves, and cannot be derived from old information or outdated observation. He also insists that

knowledge is a product of inspiration, talent, and innovation (Popper, 1959). Various post-positivist scholars maintain that knowledge cannot develop in a contextual vacuum. They require that experimental findings cannot simply be applied to various diverse situations without allowing for circumstance or context. Post-positive philosophers further designate that an “observer” (p. 28) will not ever be able to be completely separate from the “observed” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 28). According to Phillips and Burbules (2000), post-positivists are united in their conclusion that knowledge attained by humans is not based on indisputable, substantiated infrastructure. Through further investigation, knowledge can always be changed as it is fluid and flexible.

### **Model of Differentiated Expectations**

The model of differentiated expectations intimates that teachers hold similar expectations for special education students with mild disabilities as they do for students with no disabilities. Much of the reasoning behind this model is derived from both the attribution theory and various social comparison processes. Researchers believe that this is true because these disabilities appear to be hidden, and do not offer any obvious indications that a disability is evident. Students with mild disabilities might have behavioral disorders, processing difficulties, and general learning disabilities. These challenges—behavioral disorders, processing difficulties, general learning disabilities—might provide teachers with what they believe to be obvious signs of disability due to actions inside and outside of the classroom. However, the model of differentiated expectations mentions obvious disabilities as those that are more commonly associated with clear and visible physical features such as Down Syndrome, severe autism, and genetic disorders. Essentially, the model of differentiated expectations says that nondisabled students and students with mild disabilities are treated the same by general education teachers

because they do not look any different from each other. The model suggests that students with severe, or obvious, disabilities are held to lower expectations by teachers because it is clear that they have different academic and behavioral abilities than their nondisabled peers. Various research indicates that the model of differentiated expectations might offer a reason for findings that suggest students with mild disabilities are more likely to be rejected by their teachers than their peers who have severe disabilities (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010). Teachers are not the only individuals that might be influenced by the implications that are evident in the model of differentiated expectations.

Peers are also affected by the model, and Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) found that students with more severe disabilities are safeguarded from negative interactions from their peers because they might have an identifiable disability. On the other hand, students who do not have similarly recognizable problems, like those that have a learning disability or a behavioral disorder, are assumed to be accountable for any negative classroom behavior and in some instances even censured for their conduct by their non-disabled peers. This knowledge has serious ramifications for inclusion as a pedagogical strategy. When both teachers and non-disabled peers are more likely to discard the negative classroom behavior of special education students that might suffer from either a learning disability or a behavioral disability, then schools and districts that implement inclusion at their sites must be both incredibly attentive and careful in these potentially challenging learning environments.

Interestingly, due to the rationale that supports the model of differentiated expectations, general education teachers who are responsible for educating special education students in an inclusive setting do not perceive that their own teaching, and the skills and the strategies they use in the classroom, are a possible cause for low academic performance of their special education

students. Furthermore, Cook (2004) has found that general education teachers tend to set academic and behavioral goals for students with mild disabilities that are comparable to general education students. Students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators are part of the team that creates an individual education plan for each student that receives special education services. Inherent in all individualized education plans are academic and behavioral goals that are consistent and appropriate for that student's specific learning disability. From the research, it is clear that many of the academic and behavioral goals general education teachers set for special education students are in fact not tailored to meet the requirements set forth in the individualized education plan, but instead, mimic universal academic and behavioral goals that are made for general education students.

Individual interactions between teachers and students that are for an educational purpose, like teaching skills, are extremely useful for developing positive relationships and overall student learning outcomes (Brophy, 1986). This is especially true for students with learning disabilities. Kemp and Carter (2002) found that general education teachers might have more interactions, both academic and behavioral, with students with learning disabilities than students without learning disabilities. Cook (2001), however, believes that general education teachers might provide more regular academic and behavioral prompting to students with learning disabilities because the model of differentiated expectations suggests that the teacher perceives these students to be more likely to respond to the attention from the teacher.

### **Social Cognitive Theory and the Core Concept of Self-Efficacy.**

The social cognitive theory stresses that prolonged learning occurs in social settings and that most of the learning is acquired through observation. An assumption of the, as it relates to education, is that educators have the ability to affect their own behavior within the classroom,

and in so doing, create a meaningful and objective defined environment (Bandura, 2001).

Ultimately, proponents of the social cognitive theory believe that it is possible to significantly influence one's own environment and the outcomes within that environment. Social cognitive theory has several core concepts including observational learning, outcome expectations, perceived self-efficacy, goal setting, and self-regulation. Making the connection between social cognitive theory and education, Pajares (1996) maintains that the classroom environment helps to shape learning. This idea implies that how a student believes they are learning and how they interpret the environment of learning plays a huge factor in their academic achievement.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to focus specifically on the core concept of perceived self-efficacy for teachers of special education students. Achieving success at any task, either easy or difficult, is embedded in an individuals' belief in themselves. This is known as self-efficacy. Pajares (1996) has found that people are more confident in themselves when they have greater self-efficacy. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to persist through difficult tasks. Self-efficacy suggests that, "individuals pursue activities and situations in which they feel competent and avoid situations in which they doubt their capability to perform successfully" (Brownell & Pajares, 1999, p. 154).

As it relates to self-efficacy, it has been shown that general education teachers of special education students are more willing to implement research-based best-practices for inclusion if they believe that they are successful in teaching special education students. This is in contrast to teachers that have low self-efficacy in this same area (Brownell & Pajares, 1999). Simply, general education teachers are more effective at educating students with learning disabilities when they believe that they are being successful. Cameron and Cook (2013) have made a reasonable addition to this thought process by supposing that if teachers are more confident in

their ability to help special education students meet academic and behavioral goals, then they will set these goals higher and hold students accountable for meeting those goals. It is important to note that the idea of self-efficacy is true for all teachers in any setting. Brownell and Pajares (1999) suggest that teachers are more likely to apply any pedagogical strategy if they believe that it will allow them to be more effective in the classroom.

### **Tolerance Theory**

When there are students in a class with a variety of learning needs, Gerber (1988) thinks that the teacher is unable to completely meet the instructional needs of all the students. This line of thought, called the tolerance theory, maintains that all teachers have an instructional tolerance, or a limit in the ability to address student academic and behavioral instructional needs. There are certain reasons that Gerber (1988) believes that a teacher might be able to expand or constrict their instructional tolerance. For instance, expansion might result when teachers receive specific training, and constriction of the instructional tolerance might occur if specific resources are eliminated. The tolerance theory leaves teachers unintentionally dismissing certain student needs because those needs are not within the teacher's instructional tolerance. (Cook, Gerber, & Semmel, 1997). Ultimately, the tolerance theory suggests that even with countless resources within a classroom, not all students will be effectively supported, because the teacher has a limit to their instructional tolerance. Due to this tolerance it is unfeasible and impractical to believe that any teacher is able to provide all students in his or her classroom with effective instruction at the same time. It is clear then, that on a daily basis, there are specific students within that teacher's classroom that will always be within that teacher's instructional tolerance, and that there will be students that are never be in that teacher's scale of instructional tolerance. It is posited that a teacher's attitude of a specific student and their academic and behavioral ability is



influenced by whether or not that student falls within their tolerance as it relates to classroom instruction.

Unfortunately, more often than not, students receiving special education services tend not to fall within the range of a teacher's instructional tolerance, and might thus be negatively impacted by that teacher's ability and attitude (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007). As it pertains to instruction of special education students within an inclusive classroom setting, it is important to understand that the idea of instructional tolerance means that some students will never be in the scope of a teacher's instructional tolerance. Regrettably, Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley (2007) believe that special education students in an inclusive classroom usually make up a large portion of all students that might fall outside of a teacher's instructional tolerance. This, ultimately, might lead to a teacher developing biases that may affect the teachers' perception of the student's academic and behavioral ability. Furthermore, researchers believe that general education teachers feel that special education students do not achieve academic and behavioral success at levels that are consistent with their own labors when creating instructional material. This train of thought is congruent with both the model of differentiated expectation and the attribution theory where teachers are more likely to lose faith in students that are believed to have the ability to succeed, but are perceived to be reluctant to make the necessary effort.

### **Attribution Theory**

One of the most prominent theoretical frameworks on motivation called the attribution theory was proposed by Weiner in 1985. According to Weiner (1985), there are three basic criteria for the attribution theory. These criteria are causality, stability, and controllability. Causality refers to if the attribution is internal or external to the person conducting the action. Stability refers to if the attribution is stable or unstable over the course of time. Controllability

refers to whether or not the attribution is controllable by the individual. Moreover, the theory supposed that there are four sources of either success or failure in achievement-related scenarios: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. As it relates to a specific situation, each of the four sources has different significances for achievement, but also for future hopes or beliefs, emotional responses to success and failure, amount of energy exerted, and perseverance through difficult challenges (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). For example, Woodcock and Jiang (2013) created a scenario where a student believes they performed poorly on an assessment for a specific class due to low ability. This belief may then lower the self-esteem of that student, leading to a possible feeling of weakness and embarrassment. Ultimately, this student might totally remove any future hope of success in that class resulting in an apathetic future effort and performance on assessments.

The attribution theory is one that intertwines ability and effort. Weiner states that “the distinction between ability and effort is crucial to a comprehension of social responses in achievement settings” (Weiner, 1985, p. 52). As such, the framework suggests that both adults and children think that how an educator might react to a student will vary based on the attributions of effort versus ability (Weiner, 1985). As it relates to teachers’ attributions, the research shows that the perception of teachers might be influenced by their beliefs for students’ capabilities and their expectations for students’ academic and behavioral achievements (Babad, 2005; Reyna, 2000). Georgiou, Christou, Stavriniades, and Panaoura (2002) found that if students are struggling with certain subject-specific content, then teachers are more likely to alter their behavior and dealings with those students.

To this extent, Clark (1997) maintains that how teachers respond to a student is altered by how much they believe that student is able to handle certain situations. An example for this

situation would be when a teacher is upset at a high-performing student for failing an assessment due to what the teacher believes to be a lack of effort. Conversely, this teacher might have a different feeling, such as compassion or sympathy, for a low-performing student who failed the same assessment. Matteucci (2007) found that educators provide less unfavorable criticism to students that have failed assessments if those students have displayed an effort to succeed compared to students they perceived did not put forth the necessary effort to perform well on those same assessments. This is true even if the students had the same final score on the given assessment. Students, on the other hand, believe that if they expend a certain amount of effort, or give the impression that they are expending a certain amount of effort, then teachers and educators are more willing to like them. Juvonen (2000) found that students who use the attribution of effort to a higher degree than the attribution of ability during their interactions with educators within the classrooms were always rated as more liked by adults. This is in relation to those students that were considered as not expending effort and being lazy.

### **Empirical Research Summary**

The empirical research provided several theories on how general education teachers might be effected in their approach to the instruction of students with learning disabilities. These theories, taken together, were what led the researcher to the theoretical framework of post-positivity. Ultimately, each theory allowed the researcher to better understand the possible train of thought of general education teachers as it pertained to teaching special education students. The theories, as a result, built on themselves and provided a much clearer idea of the overall research approach necessary when conducting the study. Post-positivity allows for a flexible truth to be found that is based on the lived experiences of participants, and as every participant has different lived experiences, there might be a variety of different truths, and knowledge.

A theory that is of great interest is the model of differentiated expectations. It simply supposes that a teacher will have different expectations for his or her students if they have different physical appearances that are commonly associated with severe learning disabilities. So, if two students look the same, but one student has a mild learning disability and the other has no learning disability, the teacher will hold them both to the same expectations. This experience is incredibly unique to general education teachers, and each individual has their own knowledge of the matter at hand, which suggests to the researcher that post-positivity, as theoretical framework, is appropriate.

Post-positivism is also appropriate when considering social cognitive theory and the concept of self-efficacy. Social cognitive theorists believe that teachers, through their actions, are able to influence their environment either positively or negatively. Their environment in this case refers to their classroom. Again, because post-positivists think that truth is flexible, and understanding that each teacher and their classroom, is different it is quite simple to connect post-positivity and the social cognitive theory. This is even more true when considering that self-efficacy is a core concept of social cognitive theory. Self-efficacious teachers have a high belief in themselves and their abilities to effectively educate all students. Research has shown, however, that not every teacher has a high degree of self-efficacy. Some, in fact, have very low self-efficacy. Again, this idea lends itself to the opinion of post-positivists that each individual has a different worldview, and that these different worldviews create a variety of different realities.

Instructional tolerance is a theory that suggests that teachers have a threshold, or a limit, to the academic and behavioral needs they can provide to their students. Each teacher is different, and some general education teachers will be able to better serve special education

students, who usually fall outside of the instructional tolerance, than other general education teachers. Again, post-positivity is appropriate as it is built upon the foundation that every experience is unique, and all the experiences together provide a number of truths and realities.

Lastly, the attribution theory certainly punctuates the understanding that post-positivity is the appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, and as it relates to teachers, the attribution theory considers ability and effort to be closely connected to how students are viewed. Teachers tend to have high expectations for students they believe have both ability and display effort in their classrooms. It is reasonable to assume that teachers of students that have the ability and show the effort think that those students could go to college. On the flip side, however, are the students that teachers believe do not have the ability and do not show effort in their classrooms. How might a teacher consider the chances of attending college for a student of these characteristics? The question is especially poignant when differentiating between general and special education students. Post-positivists recognize that knowledge is always evolving, and when connecting the attribution theory to the many different attitudes of students and teachers, it is appropriate to believe that there each different experience provides a different reality.

### **Post-secondary Education Institution Perceptions of Special Education Students.**

Researchers have found students with learning disabilities attend post-secondary education institutions at incredibly low rates within two years of high school graduation. Wagner et al. (2005) showed that approximately 10% of students with disabilities have attended a 2-year community college, and only about 5% of students with disabilities have attended a 4-year university. Furthermore, researchers have found that greater than three-quarters of students with disabilities end up attending two or more post-secondary education institutions before receiving

their completed degree (Foley, 2006). Even though the statistics are not particularly encouraging, students with learning disabilities are breaking records for both high school graduation and attendance at 4-year universities (Henderson, 2001; Houck, Engelhard, & Geller, 1989; Hughes & Smith, 1990; Mangrum & Strichart, 1988; Scott & Berger, 1993). These record numbers have not, disappointingly, always resulted in degree completion. The U.S. Department of Education stated that over the last 25 years only about half of all students with learning disabilities had graduated from or were still enrolled in a post-secondary education institute. This data only further emphasizes the low attendance rates that continue to be an obstacle for special education students. Greenbaum, Graham, and Scales (1995) compared the graduation rates for people with learning disabilities to those without learning disabilities and found that students without learning disabilities were almost twice as likely to graduate than their learning disabled peers. These findings suggest that college readiness, defined by Conley (2007) as “primarily in terms of high school courses taken and grades received along with scores on nation tests as primary metrics” (p. 5), is beyond special education students that do not have access to the higher level courses or accommodations on national tests.

After high school, the responsibilities of securing eligibility documentation and advocating for accommodations falls squarely on students’ shoulders, as the legal protections of K-12’s IDEA (2004) no longer apply at the post-secondary level. The United States Department of Education (2007) explained: “Each postsecondary institution must provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability” (p. 2). However, students must first disclose their disability, which is a voluntary act. For personal reasons, students may decide not to reveal that they have a learning disability. If students decide not to divulge that they received special education services at the secondary

level, they inadvertently put themselves in a less than optimal situation as they most likely will not be afforded any necessary accommodations (Orr & Goodman, 2010). The voluntary disclosure of personal information relating to a learning disability is relatively unlikely, as only 40% of students with disabilities reported themselves as having a learning disability in the fall of 2000 (Henderson, 2001).

The increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities attending post-secondary education institutions is something to be celebrated. Yet, out of all the students with learning disabilities that have the credentials and ability to succeed in college, few actually enroll (Gajar, Goodman, & McAfee, 1993). A vicious cycle of unfavorable results—high rates of unemployment and underemployment—is often the consequence for the 60% of learning disabled people who do not attend, or graduate from, post-secondary education institutions (Flexor, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001; Gajar et al., 1993). Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) believe that students are not having a successful transition to postsecondary education because high schools are not providing adequate preparation for the demands of college. It is evident from the research that in order to adequately prepare students with learning disabilities for college, they must have access to rigorous classes, they must learn a variety of study skills, and they must master their own strategies for learning (Cowen, 1993; Gajar et al., 1993; Scott & Berger, 1993; Skinner, 1998).

Faculty support plays a large role in the success of students with learning disabilities at post-secondary education institutions. More specifically, the perception of faculty support might absolutely shape the academic performance of students with learning disabilities (Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005; Troiano, 2003; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Data has shown that keeping students with disabilities at the institution and graduating them through the

institution is relatively low. Some of these results are the responsibility of the faculty (Belch, 2004). Villarreal (2002), for instance, noted that many faculty members do not know how and when to effectively implement accommodations and modifications for their learning disabled students. Minner and Prater (1984) found, through a survey, that faculty at post-secondary education institutions respond more negatively to students that have learning disabilities. This resulted in the researchers deducing that some faculty might allow biases and generalizations to affect their work, which might create an additional obstacle to success for students with learning disabilities. This potential pitfall is even more evident with the knowledge that countless students with learning disabilities who had the study skills and academic intellect to succeed in a post-secondary education environment, have ultimately failed in that environment. This frustrating reality might be due to a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, the perceived inability of the faculty to adequately prepare to educate students with learning disabilities (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Dalke & Schmitt, 1987; Greenbaum et al., 1995; Mangrum & Strichart, 1988).

Faculty on the campus of every post-secondary education institution are responsible for providing a classroom environment where every student is comfortable and inspired to learn. This viewpoint is particularly true for special education students. Through research it is clear that some faculty members may still hold biased views that are an impediment to academic success for students that have been brave enough to self-identify as having a learning disability. At the time that students identify as being learning disabled, they are also labelled under the umbrella of disabled. This label might negatively influence the beliefs and anticipations that a faculty member may have for that student (Baker, Boland & Nowik, 2012).

Baker et al. (2012) found that while the majority of faculty at post-secondary educational institutions are familiar with services provided by the institutions for students with learning and



behavioral disabilities, only about half believe that those services are adequate. Furthermore, the researchers found that in their own classroom, faculty are happy and able to provide students with documented learning disabilities a multitude of accommodations such as extended test time, use of technology, and recorded lectures. Often, however, the accommodations that these faculty members are providing is not enough for the student with learning disabilities to attain success. Like all teachers, faculty at post-secondary education institutions have a certain instructional tolerance, that might be augmented by attending additional training and making use of various resources intended to improve the instruction faculty provide to students with learning disabilities. Yet, Baker et al. (2012) found that less than 20% of faculty attend professional development opportunities to increase knowledge on how to best educate students with learning disabilities even though over half of faculty stated that such trainings are available on the campus.

### **The Self-Perception of Special Education Students**

High school special education students have a relatively high tendency to drop out of school (Deshler et al., 2001). Students with learning disabilities frequently have low academic achievement. Their academic performance tends to deteriorate as the content becomes more complex when they are upper-classmen (Zigmond, 2003). While students with learning disabilities tend to have lower academic achievement, research has also shown that special education students generally present a greater behavioral challenge than their general education peers (Sabomie & deBettencourt, 2004). Studies have indicated that the two of the biggest factors for high schoolers to potentially drop out are low academic achievement and increased behavioral infractions (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989).

Several studies have taken place that investigate the perceptions of students with learning disabilities that did not complete high school. These students have reported having generally more negative relationships with teachers (Gallagher, 2002), higher levels of isolation from the teacher and the school (Seidel & Vaughn, 1991), and that they felt like they might have been forced out of the school (Kortering & Braziel, 1999). One of the more powerful perceptions that arose from Kortering and Braziel's (1999) work is that special education students who did not complete high school felt like teachers needed to adjust their own attitudes and biases towards students like them in order for the students to feel like they might have a better chance to graduate from high school.

Various research studies have found that special education students have more issues socially, emotionally, and motivationally than general education students (Chapman, 1988; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2001). Special education students face these difficult issues in addition to going through typical adolescent changes such as their physical appearance and social development. Furthermore, special education students tend to have lower beliefs in themselves academically (Gans, Kenny & Ghany, 2003) and lower self-esteem in general (Rosenthal, 1973).

Although some special education students drop out of high school, it is also evident that more are attending post-secondary education institutions than in previous decades (Henderson, 2001). One of the more remarkable factors that play arguably the most influential role in helping special education students remain in high school and pursue attendance at a post-secondary education institution is the idea of self-perception. McPhail and Stone (1995) believe that, as it pertains to academics, special education students tend to have a lower self-perception than general education students. Additionally, Stone (1997) suggests reasons why special education students might have a low academic self-perception is impacted by their academic records that

show poor achievement throughout school, and a perceived negative bias against them on the school campuses through their categorization as a special education student.

Special education students making the shift from secondary to post-secondary education have to learn to be able to self-advocate. In secondary education, the vast majority of the supports they received were provided to them through the various specifications of IDEA (1990). However, as they transition to post-secondary education institutions, these same supports are no longer available to them. It is the responsibility of the student to contact the appropriate representatives at the institution. In most cases, students would contact the Office for Students with Disabilities in order to self-identify as someone who has previously received special education services at the secondary education level. A variety of paperwork is required in order to complete this process that includes documentation of the disability, accommodations needed, self-advocacy to the faculty instructors on campus, and thorough involvement in the services that are available to support achievement (Hadley, 2011).

### **General Education Teachers' Perceptions of Special Education Students and Inclusion**

While great effort has been made in the movement to increase inclusive classroom placement, a lack of consistently positive outcomes has hampered inclusion reforms for students with disabilities (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999). Students with mild disabilities have proven to have the lowest rates of benefit from inclusive classroom settings, despite long-held assumptions that their lack of obvious differences from their nondisabled peers may make inclusive settings most beneficial to them (Wang & Reynolds, 1996). Klingner, Urbach, Golos, Brownell and Menon (2010) reported that learning disabled students, despite being in programs with unusually high levels of support, made unsatisfactory academic progress in inclusion programs they observed. Moreover, various studies have resulted in suggestions that students with learning

disabilities are not well accepted by their nondisabled peers (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Swanson & Malone, 1992).

A combination of legal and legislative (e.g., the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and its amendments) movements have helped to integrate inclusion policies into schools over a period spanning 30 years. Additionally, advocacy initiatives (Shade & Stewart, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 have lent weight to the movement behind inclusion for students with disabilities in general education settings. This philosophy of inclusion ensures that students with disabilities are able to benefit from the full range of specialty services provided them based on their disability, while still maintaining access to those programs and resources that nondisabled students enjoy (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). This inclusionary environment places students and teachers under the umbrellas of both the general education curriculum and the IEP designed for the students' specific needs.

An IEP exists as a malleable document that tracks the goals and services specifically appropriate to the learning disabled child to ensure that in all areas of need, the student has access to the most robust support for his disability. Special education students are allowed adjustments in their general education setting in order to ensure that, regardless of level of ability, their needs, as specified in their IEP, are met and adequately supported, while still maintaining full access to core curriculum (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Downing, 2008). As directed by The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997, children with disabilities must be given the opportunity to participate fully in education, as appropriate, regardless of their level of disability. Per Patterson: "If it is at all possible that schools can successfully educate students with disabilities in general education settings with peers who do not have disabilities, then the

students' school must provide that experience" (Patterson, 2005, p. 65). This allows the disabled students to receive their education in the LRE, and is a core tenant of the IDEA (1990).

The LRE allows students enrolled in the Resource Specialist Program (RSP) and the Special Day Program (SDP) to attend classes taught by general education teachers. At the high school level, these general education teachers, particularly those who teach core classes like English Language Arts, math, science, and history, play an integral role in preparing all their students for the rigors of college and/or university. Transition programs for RSP and SDP students offered at high schools and post-secondary education institutions specialize in preparing and supporting these students as they move beyond high school. General education teachers unaware of the transition programs available to their RSP and SDP students that are offered at the high school and post-secondary level are unable to help these students with the correct education steps after high school. Due to this, there is a high degree of fluctuation as it pertains to general education teachers' awareness and understanding about college attendance rates of RSP and SDP students. Milson (2002) believes that educators are "strongly encouraged to collect data that can help to inform their and others' future work with students with learning disabilities" (p. 321).

The majority of stakeholders – parents, educators, and policymakers – believe that students with learning disabilities should receive their education in a general education classroom. (Coster & Haltiwanger, 2004; D. Ferguson, 2008). When special education students and general education students are placed in classes together, it is called inclusion. Researchers believe that students with learning disabilities receive a variety of benefits from learning in a general education classroom that include them interacting with positive peer role models, learning appropriate behavior, improving their language development, and building self-esteem

(Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Staub, Schwartz, Galluci, & Peck 1994). While this has resulted in positive outcomes at the high school level, not all special education students are experiencing successful transitions to higher education institutions. Some researchers believe this is because high schools are not currently providing adequate preparation for the demands of college (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). Additionally, Cameron and Cook (2013) suggest that even though teachers might believe in the construct of inclusion and the various benefits that might result from a special education student learning in an inclusive environment, they still might not implement the pedagogical practices necessary to make the positive environment a reality in their own classrooms.

Statistically significant increases have been recorded in the recent past indicating that children with disabilities are being educated in inclusive (or, general education) settings (Katsiyannis, Conderman, & Franks, 1995; Kochanek & Buka, 1999). Per data gathered in 2004, half of students with disabilities reportedly spend upward of 80% of their school day in inclusive classroom settings. (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Inclusion benefits the general education population as well, with evidence that inclusionary policies foster a more accepting, empathetic school environment (Watnick & Sacks, 2006). Rice (2003) suggests that this inclusive school environment has potentially positive and far-reaching effects, suggesting that

today's students will someday have a say in social policies that profoundly influence the lives of individuals with those differences called disabilities. It is not unreasonable to expect that in the long run inclusive classrooms will foster a greater willingness to support disability friendly policies. (p. 460)

Research examining teacher efficacy with respect to inclusion has found that general educators who believe that they are successful in teaching children with disabilities are more willing to include those students in their classrooms and direct more teaching effort towards included students than teachers who feel less successful in this area (Brownell & Pajares, 1999).

Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) believe that special education teachers have an incredibly important and unique position of being able to positively influence the general attitude of a school toward inclusive instruction. If special education teachers, through their everyday interactions and behavior, exhibit a positive attitude toward inclusion, then schools might have more success implementing inclusion. Special education teachers, it should be noted, are different to general education teachers in a multitude of ways. Specifically, special education teachers have received certification that has been earned with the main goal of adequately supporting special education students. All certification has been acquired after extensive training designed to provide the right types of support students receiving special education services. This is in stark contrast to the training general education teachers receive as it pertains to supporting special education students.

With respect to students with mild disabilities, teachers may set goals and expect improvement in academic areas that are consistent with those held for modal students, assuming that if the child just tried harder, then he or she could perform as well as non-disabled students (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Research has shown that while almost two-thirds of general education teachers support inclusion, less than half actually agreed with concepts that make up the idea of inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Muller (2006) described a tendency on the part of instructors to avoid working with students with learning disabilities because they do not feel like they have the proper skills to adequately educate these students. Milson (2002) does not believe that general education teachers know enough to adequately support these students to get to post-secondary institutions. This research is in contrast to what others have found, where teachers are more likely to work with students with learning disabilities than average students. However, given that students with learning disabilities might need more attention in general than students

without learning disabilities, it may be deduced that teachers in the inclusive setting are responding and interacting with those students that need it most (Kemp & Carter, 2002).

Before focusing solely on special education students in an urban setting, it is absolutely vital to keep in mind the expectations and beliefs of teachers for all urban students. From the research provided in Chapter 1 it is evident that teachers have generally lower beliefs and expectations for students from an urban setting. As the research shifts from the general education student in an urban setting to the special education student in an urban setting, the assumption underlying the preceding findings is that there is a direct relationship between the goals and expectations held by teachers and their behaviors towards individual students. This is undoubtedly the rationale behind the use of measurable goals and objectives in Individual Education Programs (IEP), which are seen as a cornerstone of effective special education practice (Cameron & Cook, 2013).

School and community stakeholders should be able to use this knowledge to make more informed decisions as they attempt to improve the services that they provide to these subgroups. Through professional development and additional training, general education teachers have improved their practice in serving special education students. They must now, according to Skinner and Lindstrom (2003), “become facilitators of the transition from high school to college” (p. 133). The training of general education teachers and special education teachers is significantly different. These differences might influence the degree to which educational interactions with students are successful. Special education teachers often receive widespread preparation in how best to teach special education students, particularly as it relates to their right to an individualized instruction. While general education teachers have received professional development on how to provide instruction in whole group settings, they are not usually that



adept at facilitating individualized instructional interactions that special education students require. General education teachers need to take an active role in learning and understanding what services and opportunities are available to special education students and their families as they begin the journey to higher education. It has been found, however, that both special and general education teachers are often unsure of how to manage the needs and supports of diverse students in general education settings (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Dymond, Rengzaglia, & Chun, 2008).

### **Chapter Summary**

Students with learning disabilities are entering post-secondary education institutions in at higher rates than ever before in the United States. Their attendance, and eventual graduation, at post-secondary education institutions has provided students with learning disabilities many excellent opportunities and options for future employment. However, research has also shown that students with learning disabilities are vastly under-represented at the post-secondary education level. Some of this under-representation is due to students not self-identifying their disabilities to available transition programs at the institutions. There is evidence that suggests more students with disabilities might have the confidence to attend a post-secondary institution if the teachers who taught them at high school had greater educational aspirations for them.

A series of separate motivational theories provide insight into how a teacher's actions and words might influence their students:

- The Model of Differentiated Expectations – The model of differentiated expectations intimates that teachers hold similar expectations for special education students with mild disabilities as they do for students with no disabilities. Researchers believe that the model of differentiated expectations might offer a reason for findings that suggest students with mild

disabilities are more likely to be rejected by their teachers than their peers who have severe disabilities (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010).

- Social cognitive theory – An assumption of Social cognitive theory, as it relates to education, is that educators have the ability to affect their own behavior within the classroom, and in so doing, create a meaningful and objective defined environment (Bandura, 2001). Ultimately, proponents of the theory believe that it is possible to significantly influence one's environment and the outcomes within that environment.
- Tolerance Theory – All teachers have an instructional tolerance, or a limit in the ability to address student academic and behavioral instructional needs. This leaves teachers unintentionally dismissing certain student needs because those needs are not within the teacher's instructional tolerance. (Cook, Gerber, & Semmel, 1997).
- Attribution Theory – the research shows that the perception of teachers might be influenced by their beliefs for students' capabilities and their expectations for students' academic and behavioral achievements (Babad, 2005; Reyna, 2000). Clark (1997) suggested that how teachers respond to a student is altered by how much they believe that student is able to handle certain situations.

All four of these theories ultimately play a role in how a general education teacher might perceive a special education student. The daily interactions teachers have with all their students may have a long-term effect on the academic success that student might experience.

Statistics suggest that while special education students are attending post-secondary education institutions at higher rates than ever before, very few of them are progressing through the program to receive a degree. Faculty at post-secondary education institutions have generally admitted that they are ill-equipped to adequately and effectively implement necessary

accommodations and modifications for their learning disabled students. Furthermore, evidence implies that faculty at post-secondary education institutions are more likely to respond negatively to students with learning disabilities. Low confidence in both faculty self-efficacy and student academic ability through the perceptions of faculty and staff at post-secondary education institutions, inadvertently create a challenging learning environment for special education students.

Special education students face a variety of obstacles in their life. Academically, special education students are more prone to dropping out of high school, and this is often due to low academic achievement and a high number of behavioral issues. Research indicates that students with learning disabilities also might have more negative relationships with teachers and that they were made to feel isolated by their teachers. Unfortunately, there is evidence that implies that due to these issues with teachers, students with learning disabilities tend to have lower academic self-perception than their general education peers. The many obstacles special education students might face combined with their tendency to have a lower academic self-perception, it might be supposed that students with learning disabilities have low educational aspirations and that they do not foresee post-secondary education as a reasonable option after high school.

General education teachers believe that the practice of inclusion is an effective pedagogical strategy and a method that is necessary in order to provide the necessary support for all their special education students. Evidence suggests, however, that many general education teachers do not possess the required skills for the successful implementation needed in an inclusive setting. Disappointingly, there are a variety of statistical data that indicate inclusion is not successful, especially when the teacher is not well-versed in the strategies. It is, therefore,

imperative that general education teachers receive the training necessary in order to support all students within their classroom.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The overall purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. There is currently a dearth of academic research available as it pertains to general education teacher perceptions of special education students and their future achievements. This qualitative study will provide the field of educational research with an insight into the beliefs of general education teachers' expectations for their special education students.

The following question guided this study:

- What are the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary institutions of special education students?

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This qualitative, phenomenological study will use a comparative, cross-sectional strategy in which a phenomenological method employing semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of general education teachers in an urban charter high school with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. Phenomenological research requires that data is collected from participants who are experiencing the phenomenon.

Creswell (2012) highlights the following steps that the researcher should take when conducting a phenomenological study:

- Identification of a phenomenon to study
- Setting aside of researcher's own experience

- Collection of data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon
- Analysis of the data by combining significant statements and quotes into themes
- Development of a description of what participants experienced and the context for how they experienced it
- Combination of the descriptions in order to express the overall lived experience

Creswell (2012) also advises that when conducting phenomenological research, it is important to focus the study by asking broad questions. Specifically, he suggests the following:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?

The researcher will interview six general education teachers from several urban charter high schools located in a charter management organization in Southern California. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted at different school sites with individual teachers. When conducting exploratory studies, it is important to use qualitative study strategies as a method of inquiry to “identify variables and generate hypotheses germane to populations and groups that have been previously overlooked” (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p. 539). The proposed methodology of phenomenological research is appropriate for this study because it will investigate the lived experience of a group that have faced a common phenomenon. General education teachers at the urban charter high schools are all experiencing what it is like to educate students that receive special education services. Creswell (2013) believes that phenomenological methods of data collection gives the researcher an opportunity to gather data in settings where participants experience the phenomenon under study. Flexibility offered by semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to adapt the interview in order to more deeply explore the lived

experience of each participant based on answers given in the interview and themes present in the literature review. Phenomenological methodology fundamentally gives the researcher the opportunity to

### **Setting**

Teachers who are interviewed for the study work in an urban charter school organization located in Southern California. Experience of the educators within the urban charter school organization differ considerably amongst the schools. Nonetheless, all teachers, both general education and special education, have been with the organization for an average of 4.2 years. Each high school has approximately 600 students. This size of population requires approximately 30 teachers per high school. Additionally, high schools have two counselors between the approximately 600 students, and three administrators – one principal and two assistant principals. The organization has both middle and high schools, but this study will focus solely on teachers working in a 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade high school. The urban charter school organization has approximately 11,000 students enrolled in all of its schools, with about 7,500 of these students registered at high schools. The student population at these high schools is as follows: Hispanic 81.5%; African American 15.6%; White 0.7%; Other 2.2 %. The vast majority, or 92%, of all students are on free and reduced lunch, 20% of all students are considered English Learners, and 12% are special education students.

The average API for the urban charter school organization in 2013 was 726. Almost 20% of all high school students in the urban charter school organization are enrolled in an Advanced Placement (AP) course. While over two-thirds of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders within the organization take the SAT, only 11% of them score at or above the proficient level. Half of all 12<sup>th</sup> graders within the organization take the ACT and 15% of them score at the proficient level. In 2015, almost 80% of

all 10<sup>th</sup> graders passed the English-Language Arts section of the California High School Exit Exam, and almost 85% of these students passed the Math section of the California High School Exit Exam.

The urban charter school organization has an academic model that is intended to meet individual student needs by combining demanding curriculum with the academic counseling and student supports needed to help students succeed. Almost 7,000 students have graduated from high schools within the urban charter school organization with more than 90% of these students being accepted to college. As it pertains to special education, the urban charter school organization takes an inclusive approach with specialized instruction to maximize students' exposure to high-quality, rigorous, standards-based education. Special education programs within the urban charter school organization cultivates collaboration between general and special education teachers to guarantee that students with disabilities are integrated into the school to the maximum extent possible.

Each high school student attending school within the urban charter school organization works with counselors to create an individual graduation plan that lays out a course sequence based on individual interest and goals. This individual graduation plan, developed and revisited twice a year by the student and counselor, articulates the student's personal learning objectives and path. In order to ensure a college going culture at each of the high schools, school officials organize college field trips for every grade level, and students are encouraged to pursue additional college-related opportunities such as summer college programs at local campuses. Students also receive support for the college application process during their advisory classes.



## Populations, Sample, and Sampling Procedures

**Population.** According to Creswell (2005), the population is the large group of people in which the study is trying to identify characteristics, behaviors, or trends in attitudes or opinion. The target population for capturing the qualitative data in this study is general education teachers at an urban charter high school that is part of a larger charter management organization in Southern California. As the design of the study is of a cross-sectional design, a single population of general education teachers within an urban charter school organization who teach special education students in an inclusive setting will be examined. Approximately twelve percent of all students within the urban charter school organization are classified as special education, so it is reasonable to assume that the majority of the general teachers within the organization will meet the necessary requirements to participate in the interviews. The aggregate demographics of the population can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

*Demographic Information of high school General Education Teachers in an Urban Charter School Organization*

| Group                     | Percentage |
|---------------------------|------------|
| White                     | 46         |
| Hispanic or Latino        | 30         |
| African-American          | 8          |
| Asian                     | 12         |
| Other                     | 4          |
| 1 – 3 years of Experience | 41         |
| 4 – 7 years of Experience | 36         |

(continued)

| Group                             | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|------------|
| > 7 years of Experience           | 23         |
| Highest degree is Bachelor Degree | 62         |
| Highest degree is Master's Degree | 32         |
| Highest degree is Doctoral Degree | 6          |

**Sample.** Phenomenological studies require that all participants experience the same phenomenon. As such, a purposeful sample was used in this study. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) believe that a purposeful sample occurs when “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 105). The researcher will select participants based on the following characteristics:

1. Teachers must hold a general education teaching credential,
2. Teachers must currently be teaching students classified as receiving special education services,

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) suggest that “sample sizes in qualitative research should not be too large that it is difficult to extract thick, rich data. At the same time...the sample should not be too small that it is difficult to achieve data saturation” (p. 242). The researcher for this study plans to interview six general education teachers that have experienced teaching special education students within their own classrooms. This purposeful selection of participants allows the researcher to ask questions of study participants that have had a common experience.

**Sampling procedures.** The researcher will obtain the necessary information through a search of records at the headquarters of the charter management organization. The researcher

will then contact the potential participants via telephone and email (see Appendix A) describing the purpose of the study, the data collection protocol, and that the results of the study may be used to provide best strategies for creating a college going culture amongst special education students. Participants will be informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that they may, at any time, exclude themselves from the study. Once participants consent to the interview, they will be presented with an informed consent form (see Appendix B) that will be provided to them via email. The researcher will also bring a blank informed consent form to the interview in the event that the participant does not return the form to the researcher before the interview. The researcher will arrange to meet with the participants individually at their school site in a secured office or classroom. Each participant will be provided with the researcher's current contact information including email address and telephone number in order to guarantee effective communication between the researcher and the participant.

### **Human Subject Considerations**

Prior to engaging in research this study will be submitted to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board for review and approval in order to minimize risk of the study's participants. Permission to collect data will be obtained by the researcher from charter management organization. Furthermore, the researcher will ask the principal at the specific school site will be asked for permission to conduct research on their campus. This study will adhere to all Institution of Review Board of Pepperdine University and site mandated protocols and guidelines to protect human subjects.

All participants are considered volunteers and will be provided with a participation consent form (see Appendix A) that contains the nature of the study, description of participation, contact information of the researcher, and a statement regarding confidentiality of all

participants. Participants may terminate their involvement in the research at any phase of the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and aliases will be used to identify and code participants. Only the researcher will know the identities of the participants, and these identities will be protected and remain confidential. Data gathered during the study will be stored on the researcher's personal home computer. The password to this computer is known by the researcher only. All data relevant to this study will be destroyed five years after the study is complete. All participants must sign the consent form which reveals all potential risks of partaking in this study. As such; participants might face minimal risks that might include emotional discomfort. In the case of feeling emotionally uncomfortable, participants will be offered a break before the researcher continues with questioning. Psychologically, participants could perceive that the urban charter school organization or the researcher is judging their pedagogical skills. Participants will be notified that they may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Participants will be informed that they may also refuse to answer any question that they do not want to answer and still remain in the study. Participants will be notified that they will not be compensated for their participation in any way, but the researcher will provide a light snack and beverage for the participant during the face-to-face interviews. All participants will receive a personal thank you note from the researcher that includes information on how they may acquire the study's findings. Findings will be available to participants upon request. Requests can be made either through contacting the researcher by phone, email, or in person. Upon request, the researcher will email or mail findings to the participants and offer to discuss the findings.

## Instrumentation

One data gathering instrument will be used during this research study. An original interview instrument has been created and will be used for the phenomenological method component. The instrument contains a series of questions pertaining to the main research question.

**Semi-Structured interviews.** Qualitative Data will be collected through interviews of a semi-structured nature. According to Morse and Richards (2002), “Such interviews offer the researcher the organization and comfort of preplanned questions, but also the challenge of presenting them to participants in such a way to invite detailed, complex answers” (p. 94). In using semi-structured interviews, the researcher can ask a series of open-ended questions that examine the lived experiences of the participants. Bernard (1988) believes if an interviewer only has one chance to interview someone, then that interviewer should use semi-structured interviewing to collect data.

In addition, other researchers have highlighted advantages and benefits of semi-structured interviews. Barriball and While (1994, p. 329) list the following advantages:

- Response rates may be higher than those in questionnaire survey;
- Facilitates fluid examination of beliefs and attitudes of subject;
- Visual cues give interviewer insights by way of non-verbal indicators and body language, particularly in instances where subject matter is sensitive or emotionally charged;
- Data set is more thorough, and thus more useful for comparison, given attendance of interviewer overseeing completion of all questions;
- Sterile response environment is maintained, ensuring respondent is not influenced or helped by other social or environmental factors in his response.

The researcher considered using a structured question process to conduct the interviews participants. This method, however, is thought to offer interviewees clues as to what the desired response the researcher might be seeking. Using a semi-structured interview process allows the researcher to gather information through open-ended responses. A main purpose behind utilizing the semi-structured interview method is, as Creswell (2013) explains, to provoke the perspective and position of a participant for a specific topic. Although questions will be developed prior to the interview (see Table 4), the open-ended nature of the interview will allow for the participants to adequately communicate their lived-experiences as general education teachers instructing special education students. While the open-ended questions might afford participants with the necessary opportunity to share their lived-experiences, it will also be a chance for participants to convey the feelings and understanding they have of their own familiarity and practices of educating students that receive special education services.

Table 4

*Connecting Research Questions to Interview Questions*

| Research Questions   | Interview Questions  |
|--|--|
| What are the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at a post-secondary education institution of special education students? | <p>Which classification(s) of special education students are you teaching, or have you taught? (RSP / SDP)</p> <p>What three to five competencies would a general education teacher need to cultivate in his/her own teaching style to encourage special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution?</p> <p>What three to five competencies would a general education teacher need to cultivate in their special education students to encourage them to attend a post-secondary education institution?</p> <p>In comparison to general education teachers that struggle to motivate special education students to consider higher education as an option, what teaching qualities do you view as effective in encouraging special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution?</p> |

(continued)

| Research Questions | Interview Questions  |
|--------------------|--|
|                    | How do general education teachers in this organization feel about special education students attending post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school?                                    |
|                    | How do you feel about special education students from this organization attending post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school?   |
|                    | What are three to five reasons why a special education student from this organization might attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school?                                       |
|                    | What are three to five reasons why a special education student from this organization might not attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school?                                   |
|                    | What expectation do general education teachers in this organization have for special education students upon their graduation from high school?  |
|                    | In what ways, if any, can schools in this organization help general education teachers to encourage special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school? |

The researcher proposed one comparative research question in Chapter 1. In this chapter, the rationale was also described. Through the preceding pages, the researcher describes ways in which to measure the hypothesis.

**Validity.** In order to acquire validity for the data gathering instrumentation, it is important for the researcher to gather critical feedback from experts of the content. Colleagues with doctorate degrees will help to review the process of data collection and the product thereof. These individuals have become experts through their own research or through personal knowledge and professional experience. Expert review of the data will allow the researcher to identify any areas of possible misconception that arose through their own, independent, review.

Moreover, experts that review the data might also be able to find some new themes that the researcher was unable to independently identify through the initial analysis.

**Reliability.** Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) believe that reliability in qualitative research is particularly important as it pertains to the coding during data analysis. Due to this, the researcher will be the primary coder and will only gain insight from peer reviewers of the data. Creswell (2013) suggests that certain protective measures can be utilized when reliability of a study is concerned. These measures include constantly comparing the codes with the data, making sure that the coding definitions are clear, and reviewing transcriptions for any noticeable mistakes.

### **Data Collection and Data Management Procedures**

The researcher will first obtain data from the headquarters of the urban charter school organization to ascertain the current whereabouts, in terms of academic standing, of all high school graduates that received special education services. This data will be filtered to only include those graduates that currently attend, or have previously attended, in any capacity, college or university classes as an enrollee of that college or university. Secondly, and over the course of several weeks, the researcher will conduct the semi-structured interviews with general education teachers that are currently employed within the urban charter school organization. The analysis of data for this qualitative, comparative study will measure the degree of perception of general education teachers as it pertains to college attendance for special education students. These descriptive statistics will provide general characteristics of the data and will allow the researcher to condense the data into a central theme.

**Data collection.** Teacher interviews will be conducted with six urban charter school organization general education teachers. Participants will be interviewed once, and interviews



will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions will be stored in a password protected Microsoft Word document. Furthermore, the researcher will take anecdotal notes to enhance the participants' responses to interview questions. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) suggests that these meetings should be scheduled at a time that is convenient for the participant the school site and a location free from any distractions. Interviews will be conducted at the teachers' school site in a private location, and at a time that both the researcher and the teacher agreed upon. Ethical issues and the assuredness of confidentiality of participating in the interview will be discussed before the interview started. Furthermore, the researcher will review the consent form and outline the purpose of the study with the teacher. The approximate length for each interview will be between 45 and 60 minutes.

Each interview should be as similar as possible, and the procedure has been developed when conducting interviews:

1. Confirm that the recording device is functional and fully charged.
2. Greet participant and thank them for their time and participation
3. Offer participant choice of snacks and beverages
4. Collect signed consent form from participant
5. Verify clarity of consent form and answer any clarifying questions posed by participant.
6. Review the purpose of the study and explain how the interview will be utilized as data.
7. Review the time commitments of the interview and the format of questioning.
8. Remind the participant that the interview will be recorded and that the interviewer will also be taking notes.
9. Remind the participant that they have the option of answer the questions, declining to answer, or partially answering.

10. Remind the participant that they can request to stop recording the interview process at any time.
11. Begin the recording and identify the participant by pseudonym.
12. Ask each question individually and allow the participant to relay their experience without interruption.
13. Record main points on the interview protocol in order to back up equipment failure.
14. Select unplanned additional questions to elicit additional details from participant response.
15. Complete the interview questions and follow up with offer for participant to add any additional information which is relevant to their experience.
16. Thank the participant for their participation.
17. Provide the participant with a signed copy of their consent form which includes contact information should they have any clarifying questions or comments.
18. Transcribe recorded interview in order to process as data.

**Data Management.** According to Richards & Morse (2007), qualitative research can cause for an enormous volume of data to be managed, in which arise the problems of how to manage the amount of data and how to manage the data records. It is imperative for the researcher to manage the collected data efficiently through proper planning that is developed prior to collecting data (Richards & Morse, 2007). Data management will include consistently checking that a sufficient and adequate amount of pertinent data has been gathered.

The data management process starts with the physical supervision of data. This includes both notes and recordings from the interviews. These will be kept in a secure location by the researcher in a locked drawer in a location of campus. All physical documents will be scanned and stored on the researcher's personal computer. In order to allow for anonymity, the researcher

will assign pseudonyms to each participant. Research data will be compiled on the researcher's personal, password protected computer. All data and documents will also be stored on an additional external hard drive.

### **Data Analysis and Reporting**

The data analysis process for this research study will consist specifically of using the strategy of open coding. Cresswell (2013) believes that the data analysis process for all qualitative studies should be explained through what is called linear hierarchy. Strauss and Corbin (1990) believe that open coding allows the researcher to analyze qualitative data by examining it, comparing it, categorizing it, and conceptualizing it. By using this type of coding, the researcher is able to recognize certain themes that might appear as it relates to general education teachers' personal beliefs for special education students' attendance at post-secondary education institutions. Richards and Morse (2007) suggest that while analyzing data, the researcher take comprehensive notes, and then catalogue those notes into specific themes.

After the themes are identified by the researcher, they will be input into a spreadsheet. This allows the researcher to view how frequently certain statements, quotes, and phrases are said during the interviews. The identified themes are then used to develop core factors about specific general education teachers' beliefs about the future college attendance of special education students.

### **Design Credibility/Trustworthiness and Limitations**

Through semi-structured interviews, this study will be able to examine the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at a post-secondary education institution of special education students. All statements from participants will be analyzed line by line and grouped in order to create themes

and categories. The researcher plans to ask for help from experienced external coders to independently analyze the transcripts of the individual interviews. This will be done in order to remove any potential researcher bias and ensure trustworthiness by triangulating the findings of the external coders and the researcher. As a result of the data gathering process, recommendations as to pedagogical strategies and school-wide incentive programs might be made and potentially improve the number of special education students attending post-secondary education institutions.

### **Positionality**

The research focus for this study was chosen based on experiences mainly encountered during my professional life. On a personal level, I am neither a special education student, nor are any of my immediate family members special education students. My awareness of special education students during my own academic career was relatively low and uninformed. Generally speaking, I was much more mindful of peers that were severely intellectually disabled than peers that had mild disabilities. I imagine this heightened mindfulness was due to the fact that I was able to see that these students might be disabled, whereas I was unable to see that students had mild disabilities.

As a general education science teacher in a large urban public school district, I was taught that at the beginning of the school year I should scan my rosters in order to identify students that were, and would be, receiving special education services during the year. Upon doing this, I regularly noticed that approximately 10% of all my students in every class were classified as special education. I found that my abilities as a new teacher to differentiate lessons and plan appropriately for all students, and specifically special education students, were severely lacking. As the year progressed, it became apparent that, along with several general education students,

the majority of the special education students performed poorly on both academic and behavioral benchmarks. I remember being left frustrated by the lack of adequate training I received in order to properly serve special education students, and disheartened by what I perceived would be a difficult future for those same students.

Moving into school administration taught me the importance of staying in compliance with a multitude of special education laws and regulations. It also showed me that I have the ability to provide adequate training to general education teachers who are responsible for educating special education students. Our ultimate goal at the school is to graduate college-ready students. We pride ourselves on believing in the potential of all students. My desire is to see how strong this belief is within the entire organization. At the same time, however, I understand that college or university is not the goal of every student, including special education students. Nonetheless, it is my belief that in providing an excellent education to every student we put that student in the position to make an informed decision about their options after high school, which might include choices such as college, university, vocational school, the military, or the workforce. My role as a school administrator requires me to evaluate teachers on a yearly basis. None of the participants in this study are teachers that I evaluate, or plan to evaluate, at any time in my tenure as an administrator in the charter management organization. Furthermore, it is important to note that I have neither met nor know through any form of correspondence any of the general education teachers that will be interviewed as participants in this study.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The overall purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions.

This qualitative, phenomenological study used a comparative, cross-sectional strategy in which a phenomenological method employing semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of general education teachers in an urban charter high school with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. Phenomenological research requires that data is collected from participants who are experiencing the phenomenon. For this study, the researcher interviewed six general education teachers to gain an understanding of their lived experiences. Presented in this chapter is the research question that was used to guide this study in addition to the outcomes of the teacher interviews. The comments of the six general education teachers were analyzed and coded for themes that described their beliefs and perceptions as it relates the future attendance post-secondary education institutions by special education students.

The following research question guided this study:

- What are the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of special education students?

The research question was addressed by conducting semi-structured interviews with six general education teachers that are currently responsible for teaching students with learning disabilities within their own general education classrooms. Responses from the interviews were

examined using a procedure comparable to the one Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) describes as a data analysis spiral, which requires reviewing transcriptions of the interviews several times to emphasize meaningful statements and quotes that can be categorized into themes. Ultimately, several core themes emerged regarding the perceptions and beliefs held by general education teachers as it relates to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The presentation of findings section begins with Table 5 that highlights the participant responses, key words, and statements to each of the ten questions. Following Table 5 is a series of Tables (6 – 11) that emphasize the themes which emerged after the interview responses, key words, and statements were examined and coded. Table 12 then displays the collective emerging themes categorized by interview question.

Progressing past the first eight tables, the themes that emerged from the coding procedure are then highlighted and discussed in greater detail from Table 13 through Table 22. After the presentation of the themes, the statements pertaining specifically to the classification of special education students previously and currently taught, and the belief in special education students attending post-secondary institutions are presented in Table 23 and Table 24. Lastly, a summary of the findings completes the chapter.

Table 5

#### *Teacher Participant Interview Responses, Key Words, and Statements*

| Question                   | Teacher 1                     | Teacher 2                    | Teacher 3                  | Teacher 4    | Teacher 5    | Teacher 6           |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Which classification(s) of | Majority of special education | Majority of students are RSP | Only teaching RSP students | RSP students | RSP students | Mostly RSP students |

(continued)

| Question  | Teacher 1  | Teacher 2  | Teacher 3   | Teacher 4   | Teacher 5  | Teacher 6  |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| special education students are you teaching, or have you taught? (RSP / SDP)  | students are RSP<br><br>Taught SDP students in past years  | Co-teaching a class with SDP students  |   |   |  | Have taught SDP students previously  |
| What three to five competencies would a general education teacher need to cultivate in his/her own teaching style to encourage special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution? | Patience<br><br>Maintaining high expectations<br><br>Scaffolding and differentiation<br><br>Identifying strategies that help individual students<br><br>Communicating effective learning strategies to students so they know how to learn best | Teaching with love<br><br>Patience<br><br>Growth mindset is key so that students know they are capable<br><br>Help students to believe in themselves | Belief that all students can be successful<br><br>Flexibility to accommodate and modify curriculum<br><br>Collaboration with special education teacher<br><br>Relationship with special education teacher | Ability to scaffold and differentiate<br><br>Willingness to accommodate and modify curriculum<br><br>Need to be flexible<br><br>Teachers need to care and show student that they want them to do better | Multiple check for understandings during class time<br><br>Literacy based techniques in the class<br><br>Grit and determination on the teacher end | Belief in all students<br><br>Ability to be flexible in order to accommodate and modify<br><br>Collaboration with special education teachers |

(continued)



| Question  | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2  | Teacher 3   | Teacher 4  | Teacher 5   | Teacher 6   |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| What three to five competencies would a general education teacher need to cultivate in their special education students to encourage them to attend a post-secondary education institution? | Knowing how to cultivate a child's belief in themselves<br><br>Encouraging perseverance to access challenging information<br><br>Ability to self-advocate for additional support and help<br><br>Willingness to be reflective on areas of strength and growth | Encourage self-belief<br><br>Help students to build confidence through questioning and discourse<br><br>Urge students to advocate for themselves | Encourage students to have belief in themselves<br><br>Having strong self-esteem is important<br><br>Faith in their own ability<br><br>Confidence in themselves<br><br>Fostering self-confidence<br><br>Teaching importance of strong work ethic<br><br>Time management<br><br>Study skills | Students need to feel supported<br><br>Students need to have confidence<br><br>They need a bank of study methods – skills to be successful | Special education students need to self-advocate so they can get extra help<br><br>They need to be invested in their classes and their education.<br><br>Special education students need grit and determination to overcoming challenging times | There is a need to build self-confidence in special education students.<br><br>Special education students need to be able to self-advocate<br><br>Inspire students to believe in themselves |
| In comparison to general education teachers that struggle to motivate   | Genuine belief that a student can attend college<br><br>Genuine concern for students as individuals   | Understanding the different opportunities that are available after graduation<br><br>Encourage students to                                       | A philosophical belief that students can attend college<br><br>The ability to be flexible   | Having a good relationship with the student to understand who they are and let the student know that you care about them.                  | Persistence and perseverance is important for general education teacher.<br><br>Adaptability and  | Flexibility is really important to appropriately plan for special education students<br><br>Strong relationship   |

(continued)

| Question   | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2   | Teacher 3  | Teacher 4   | Teacher 5  | Teacher 6   |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|---|
| special education students to consider higher education as an option, what teaching qualities do you view as effective in encouraging special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution? | Genuine encouragement and praise<br><br>Provide information and college and university experience             | visit high school teachers after graduation<br><br>Students need to have a plan for after graduation                  | when implementing accommodations and modification<br><br>Compassion and understanding for special education students<br><br>Special education students must know that the teacher believes in them<br><br>Relationship between teacher and student is very important | Share your experiences with the students  | flexibility allows teachers to find different ways to teach students<br><br>Build relationships with your special education students | s with students<br><br>A true belief in the student and their potential   |
| How do general education teachers in this organization feel about special education  | Believing in all students' potential is evident on campus<br><br>A belief system that shows special education | Most believe that success at college is unrealistic and that the students won't do well<br><br>They feel like special | The majority of people work at charter management organizations because of their unwaver-  | I believe that my colleagues feel like special education students can survive college | They don't feel differently about general education and special education students   | They believe that they can attend a post-secondary institute<br>Probably more likely to attend community college than |

(continued)

| Question   | Teacher 1  | Teacher 2  | Teacher 3   | Teacher 4   | Teacher 5   | Teacher 6   |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| students attending post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school?      | students can achieve and do well after graduation exists   | education students might not even get to university  | ing belief that every student should be college ready when they graduate high school<br><br>Our teachers embody that mission and feel like they are preparing students for college and life after high school<br><br>Technical institutes are not as valued in our organization |   |   | a 4-year university   |
| How do you feel about special education students from this organization attending post-secondary | Students in my class with learning disabilities have gone onto a post-secondary education institution<br><br>If they are receiving | I do believe that in general, special education students have the ability and capability to go to a community college or university after high | Technical college is definitely a realistic goal  | They can attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school | They can go to college<br><br>Some of my students would really struggle in post-secondary education, but most | I believe that they are more likely to go to a community college than a 4-year university |

(continued)

| Question   | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2  | Teacher 3  | Teacher 4   | Teacher 5   | Teacher 6   |
|--|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| education institutions after graduation from high school?  | the correct emotional and academic support, I feel like it is highly possible for them to make it through   | school, but the difficult arises from the lack of emotional support after high school.   |  |   | of them would succeed   |   |
| What are three to five reasons why a special education student from this organization might attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school? | Being helped with the application process<br><br>They must have a passion for topics and subjects and careers<br><br>Our students must learn to advocate for themselves<br><br>Receive continued support either from the school they're going to or coming back to us | Small schools are able to make connections with students<br><br>Exposure to a lot of adults that encourage and push them to fulfill their potential<br><br>To hear about goals after high school is an important part of the Individualized Education Plan | Family support and encouragement<br><br>Experience in school.<br>How successful or unsuccessful they feel in school<br><br>How well a school has prepared or not prepared them to handle the challenges of college or university | Small schools give more attention<br><br>Build confidence in the students<br><br>Develop the necessary skills to succeed at college | Important to set goals<br><br>Finding out what the student is interested in and what they are good at | Self-advocacy is a big factor<br><br>Family encouragement<br><br>Their success in high school |

(continued)

| Question   | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2  | Teacher 3  | Teacher 4  | Teacher 5   | Teacher 6  |
|--|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| What are three to five reasons why a special education student from this organization might not attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school? | <p>If they're not helped with the application process</p> <p>They're not encouraged, but just get a general sense that the teachers do not believe in them</p> <p>If they've not experienced success in high school</p> <p>If they're not taught about programs that colleges offer</p> | <p>Fear of change</p> <p>Moving out of high school and having to be more independent</p> <p>Models of success in their own life</p> <p>Lack of accountability from teachers or case carrier because no one is checking up on you</p> | <p>Lack of family support and encouragement</p> <p>Experience in school. How successful or unsuccessful they feel in school</p> <p>How well a school has prepared or not prepared them to handle the challenges of college or university</p> | <p>Students were passed through and didn't earn their graduation</p> <p>They didn't have teachers that cared or wanted to build those relationships</p> <p>They weren't motivated</p> <p>Not the correct resources available</p> | <p>Lack of organization skills</p> <p>Offering more electives</p> <p>Apathy is also big reason.</p>                     | <p>Minimal encouragement from family and school</p> <p>Lack of belief in themselves because of minimal success in high school</p> <p>Difficulty with the application process</p> |
| What expectations do general education teachers in this organization have for special education  | <p>We expect them to advocate for themselves</p> <p>We expect them to pursue their passion</p>  | <p>Most general education teachers would expect that they would get a job.</p> <p>Most teachers would want them to be</p>  | <p>It is important to have expectations that are attainable and encouraging rather than detrimental</p>  | <p>If students are helped/assisted in getting into college, they will do fine once they are there</p> <p>They need to have that confidence</p>   | <p>To hopefully move onto a trade in a post-secondary institution</p> <p>It's not an "or" thing it's an "and" thing</p> | <p>To graduate and to learn a skill at a post-secondary education institution or get a job</p> <p>Contribute in some way to society</p>  |

(continued)

| Question   | Teacher 1  | Teacher 2   | Teacher 3  | Teacher 4   | Teacher 5  | Teacher 6   |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| n<br>students<br>upon<br>their<br>gradua-<br>tion<br>from<br>high<br>school?   | We expect<br>them to be<br>more self-<br>sufficient<br><br>These are<br>expectatio<br>ns I have<br>for every<br>one of my<br>students.<br>It's<br>interesting<br>to think<br>that we<br>would<br>have<br>different<br>expectatio<br>ns for our<br>students<br>with<br>special<br>needs | doing<br>something,<br>not doing<br>nothing.  | Realistic<br>goals would<br>be for you<br>to go to a<br>community<br>college<br>where they<br>can earn<br>their<br>associates<br>degree. For<br>other<br>students it<br>makes<br>sense to go<br>to a<br>technical<br>college | Some of<br>them go to<br>college, and<br>some of<br>them do not.  |  |   |
| In what<br>ways, if<br>any, can<br>schools<br>in this<br>organiza-<br>tion<br>help<br>general<br>educatio<br>n<br>teachers<br>to<br>encoura<br>ge<br>special<br>educatio<br>n<br>students<br>to attend | Trans-<br>parency<br>about the<br>programs<br>would be<br>really<br>helpful<br><br>If general<br>education<br>teachers<br>knew that<br>there are<br>people at<br>the home<br>office<br>helping<br>students<br>with future<br>plans, then   | Talk to<br>students<br>about their<br>future plans<br><br>Making<br>real-world<br>connections<br>in classes<br><br>It would be<br>helpful if it<br>was made<br>clear to<br>general<br>education<br>teachers<br>about what<br>are the<br>possibilities | Collabora-<br>tion<br>between<br>general<br>education<br>and special<br>education<br>teachers<br><br>Need more<br>profession-<br>al<br>developmen<br>t about how<br>to<br>accommoda<br>te and<br>modify for<br>special       | Continue to<br>build<br>relation-<br>ships<br>between<br>general<br>education<br>and special<br>education<br>teachers<br><br>Train the<br>general<br>education<br>teachers<br>more so that<br>they don't<br>perceive<br>them as | Find ways<br>to invest<br>Special<br>education<br>students in<br>the idea of<br>attending<br>post-<br>secondary<br>education<br>institutions<br><br>Special<br>education<br>students<br>and<br>general<br>education<br>students<br>are not | Professiona<br>l<br>developmen<br>t delivered<br>by special<br>education<br>teachers<br><br>Thorough<br>collaboratio<br>n between<br>special<br>education<br>teachers<br>and general<br>education<br>teachers |

(continued)

| Question  | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2   | Teacher 3   | Teacher 4       | Teacher 5       | Teacher 6 |
|---|---|---|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school? | they might be more encouraging<br><br>Hearing stories about actual students.<br><br>Testimonials from students themselves would be encouraging and valuable | for special education students once they graduate<br><br>Professional development presented by special education teachers | education students<br><br>Relationships between teachers<br><br>Expectations from school leadership | being different | much different. |           |

Positioning the responses, key words, and statements into groups resulted in ten categories, or themes, that appeared from their associated meanings. Tables 6 – 11 displays the emerging themes from the six general education teacher interviews for the open-ended interview questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 that give an overall idea of the lived experience of the general education teachers.

Table 6

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Teaching Style Competencies*

| Teaching Style Competencies Themes         | Coded Responses |
|--|-----------------|
| Flexibility                                | 3               |
| Care                                       | 2               |
| Teacher Belief in Student                  | 2               |
| Collaboration, Communication, and Training | 2               |

Table 7

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Special Education Student Competencies*

| Special Education Student Competencies Themes | Coded Responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Student Self-belief and self-confidence       | 4               |
| Student Self-advocacy                         | 4               |
| Encouragement                                 | 3               |
| Support from Family and School                | 2               |

Table 8

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Qualities of a Successful Teacher*

| Special Education Student Competencies Themes | Coded Responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Relationships                                 | 4               |
| Teacher Belief in Student                     | 3               |
| Flexibility                                   | 3               |
| Encouragement                                 | 2               |

Table 9

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Attend a Post-Secondary Institution*

| Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Attend a Post-Secondary Institution Themes | Coded Responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Support from Family and School  | 5               |
| Future goals of Student   | 3               |
| Student Self-advocacy   | 2               |
| Encouragement   | 2               |



Table 10

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Not Attend a Post-Secondary Institution*

| Reasons that a Special Education Student Might Not Attend a Post-Secondary Institution Themes | Coded Responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Support from Family and School  | 3               |
| Encouragement   | 3               |
| Future goals of Student   | 2               |

Table 11

*Themes Emerging from General Education Teacher Response to how the Organization can help General Education Teachers*

| How the Organization can help General Education Teachers Themes | Coded Responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Collaboration, Communication, and Training                      | 9               |
| Future goals of Student   | 3               |
| Relationship  | 2               |

Table 12 displays the collective emerging themes that surfaced from the participating general education teacher interview responses, key words, and statements.

Table 12

*Collective Emerging Themes*

| Theme                     | Question 2 | Question 3 | Question 4 | Question 7 | Question 8 | Question 10 |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Flexibility               | X          |            | X          |            |            |             |
| Care                      | X          |            | X          |            | X          |             |
| Teacher Belief in Student | X          |            | X          |            |            |             |

(continued)

| Theme  | Question<br>2 | Question<br>3 | Question<br>4 | Question<br>7 | Question<br>8 | Question 10 |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Collaboration,<br>Communication,<br>and Training | X             |               |               |               |               | X           |
| Student Self-<br>Belief and Self-<br>Confidence  |               | X             |               |               |               |             |
| Student Self-<br>Advocacy                        |               | X             |               | X             |               |             |
| Encouragement                                    |               | X             | X             | X             | X             |             |
| Support from<br>School and<br>Family             |               | X             |               | X             | X             |             |
| Relationships                                    |               |               | X             |               | X             | X           |
| Future Goals of<br>Student                       |               |               |               | X             | X             | X           |

Theme 1: Flexibility. Table 13 displays each general education teachers' responses, key words, and statements in regards to flexibility.

Table 13

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Flexibility*

| General<br>Education<br>Teacher | Theme 1 – Flexibility  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1                               | No statements apply  |
| 2                               | No statements apply  |
| 3                               | Flexibility to accommodate and modify curriculum<br>The ability to be flexible when implementing accommodations and modification |
| 4                               | Willingness to accommodate and modify curriculum   |

(continued)

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| General<br>Education<br>Teacher | Theme 1 – Flexibility   |
|                                 | Need to be flexible   |
| 5                               | Adaptability and flexibility allows teachers to find different ways to teach students   |
| 6                               | Ability to be flexible in order to accommodate and modify<br>Flexibility is really important to appropriately plan for special education students |

The theme of flexibility was most evident when the participants responded to questions about the competencies that general education teachers would need to cultivate in their own teaching styles to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions, and the effective qualities that successful general education practice when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions. In referencing the term and idea of flexibility, the participants noted that it was especially important for the general education teacher to be willing to plan effectively when teaching special education students. Teacher #6 stated that “flexibility is really important to appropriately plan for special education students.” In education, planning encompasses a variety of strategies and topics. However, this theme of flexibility emerged through participant responses specifically when they mentioned accommodating and modifying general education curriculum for special education students.

Participants noted several times that the need to accommodate and modify curriculum is absolutely necessary to have success when educating students with learning disabilities. Teacher #3, 4, 5, and 6 mentioned the need to be flexible in order to appropriately modify and accommodate the curriculum for special education students. Teacher #3 said that general education teachers must have “the ability to be flexible when implementing accommodations and

modification”, while Teacher #4 believes that general education teachers need to display a “willingness to accommodate and modify curriculum.” Additionally, Teacher #5 believes that in order to be successful when adequately educating special education students, and to ultimately encourage them to attend post-secondary institutions general education teachers need to have an “adaptability and flexibility (that) allows teachers to find different ways to teach students.”

Flexibility emerged as a theme because there were seven different statements by four different participants throughout the interview that referenced flexibility and adaptability as a competency and effective teaching quality when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 2: Care. Table 14 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to care.

Table 14

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Care*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 2 – Care   |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1                         | Genuine concern for students as individuals  |
| 2                         | Teaching with love   |
| 3                         | Compassion and understanding for special education students  |
| 4                         | (continued)<br>Teachers need to care and show students that they want them to do better.<br>Having a good relationship with the student to understand who they are and let the student know that you care about them.<br>They didn’t have teachers that cared or wanted to build those relationships |
| 5                         | No statements apply  |
| 6                         | No statements apply  |

Participant responses to the questions regarding the competencies and the qualities successful general education teachers employ to effectively encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions revealed the theme of care. It was clear that participants think it is absolutely vital that general education teachers show their students-through words, actions, and rapports – that they care about them as individuals. Teacher #2 said that “teaching with love” is imperative when trying to encourage students to reach future goals.

This general sentiment was echoed by several other respondents as they made it obvious that a general education teacher must display, according to Teacher #1, a “genuine concern for students as individuals”, and Teacher #3, a “compassion and understanding for special education students” as part of their teaching style. A general education teacher without these qualities, according to respondents, will not be successful at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions. In fact, Teacher #4 believes that a reason why a special education student might not attend a post-secondary institution after high school graduation is because that student “didn’t have teachers that cared or wanted to build those relationships.”

Care emerged as a theme because there were six different statements by four different participants throughout the interview that referenced care, love, concern, and compassion as a competencies and effective teaching qualities when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 3: Teacher Belief in Student. Table 15 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to teacher belief in student

Table 15

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Teacher Belief in Student*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 3 – Teacher Belief in Student   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1                         | <p>Genuine belief that a student can attend college</p> <p>Believing in all students' potential is evident on campus</p> <p>A belief system that shows special education students can achieve and do well after graduation exists</p> <p>They're not encouraged, but just get a general sense that the teachers do not believe in them</p> <p>If they've not experienced success in high school</p> |
| 2                         | No statements apply   |
| 3                         | <p>Belief that all students can be successful</p> <p>A philosophical belief that students can attend college</p> <p>An unwavering belief that every student should be college ready when they graduate from high school</p> <p>Special education students must know that the teacher believes in them</p>   |
| 4                         | No statements apply   |
| 5                         | No statements apply   |
| 6                         | <p>Belief in all students</p> <p>A true belief in the student and their potential</p>   |

Teacher belief in students was an important theme to emerge from the interviews with the general education teachers. While three out of six participants did not have statements that applied to this theme, the participants that did mention the significance of a teacher believing in their students made numerous responses to suggest that the theme is noteworthy. Teacher #1, 3, and 6 suppose that general education teachers will be effective at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions if they have a genuine belief in their students. Moreover, Teacher #1 thinks that if a general education teacher obviously does not believe in

their special education students, it would serve as one reason why a special education student might not go on to attend a post-secondary institution after high school graduation.

Interestingly, the participants that mentioned how important having a belief in students is when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions mentioned that the belief in the potential of all students is part of the mission of the charter management organization. Teacher #3 had made several notable statements to this point including saying that it is essential that teachers have “an unwavering belief that every student should be college ready when they graduate from high school.” Teacher #6 emphasized this point further by recognizing how important it is to have a “belief in all students” that is genuine, so as to display “a true belief in the student and their potential.” Teacher #1 feels that her general education colleagues within the charter management organization think that special education students can attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation, because “believing in all students’ potential is evident on campus(es).”

Teacher belief in students emerged as a theme because there were eleven different statements by three different participants throughout the interview that referenced teacher belief in students as a competency and effective teaching quality when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 4: Collaboration, Communication, and Training. Table 16 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to collaboration, communication, and training

Table 16

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Collaboration, Communication, and Training*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 4 – Collaboration, Communication, and Training   |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1                         | Communicating effective learning strategies to students so they know how to learn best<br>Transparency about the programs would be really helpful<br>If general education teachers knew that there are people at the district office helping students with future plans, then they might be more encouraging |
| 2                         | It would be helpful if it was made clear to general education teachers about what are the possibilities for special education students once they graduate<br>Professional development presented by special education teachers  |
| 3                         | Collaboration with special education teacher<br>Collaboration between general education and special education teachers<br>Expectations from school leadership<br>Need more professional development about how to accommodate and modify for special education students                                       |
| 4                         | Train the general education teachers more so that they don't perceive them as being different  |
| 5                         | Find ways to invest special education students in the idea of attending PSIs   |
| 6                         | Collaboration with special education teachers<br>Thorough collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers<br>Professional development delivered by special education teachers  |

The theme of collaboration, communication, and training was particularly evident after the coding of responses from the participants. This theme emerged primarily from responses to the interview questions about competencies that general education teachers need to cultivate in their own teaching styles and how the charter management organization can help general education teachers to be more effective at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary



institutions. Responses from all six participants included an emphasis on the theme of collaboration, communication, and training.

Teacher #3 and #6 both believe that there should be a greater emphasis on opportunities for collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Teacher #3 believes that a “collaboration with the special education teacher” is needed, while Teacher #6 echoed this sentiment saying, “thorough collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers” might help to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation.

Communication was a major factor in the emergence of this theme. This opinion was evident as it pertained to communication with the student, within the school, and within the charter management organization home office. Specifically, Teacher #1 believes it is crucial for general education teachers to be adept at “communicating effective learning strategies to (special education) students so they know how to learn best.” This is particularly important as the students move on to a post-secondary institution after high school graduation. The role of the administrators on campus is highlighted by Teacher #3 who thinks that “expectations from school leadership” should be more clear as to what is envisaged for the education of students with learning disabilities. Lastly, as it relates to communication, Teacher #1 and #2 supposes that the charter management organization plays a critical part in the process of encouraging students to attend post-secondary institutions because it is their responsibility to relay the work that is already being done for special education students at the district level. Teacher #1 says that “transparency about the (special education) programs would be really helpful” to general education teachers, and that “if general education teachers knew that there are people at the district office helping students with future plans, then they might be more encouraging” in their

daily work with special education students in their own classrooms. Teacher #2 mirrors this statement by staying “it would be helpful if it was made clear to general education teachers about what are the possibilities for special education students once they graduate.”

Finally, all respondents believe that more comprehensive training and professional development should be provided to general education teachers so that they might improve their own practice as it pertains to encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions. Teacher #2 and #6 both want special education teachers to deliver professional development to general education teachers, with Teacher #6 saying “that professional development delivered by special education teachers” will be useful when learning how to encourage special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution after graduation from high school. Teacher #3 wants more strategies for helping special education students by saying that general education teachers “need more professional development about how to accommodate and modify for special education students”, while Teacher #5 says that it is important to help general education teachers to “find ways to invest special education students in the idea of attending post-secondary institutions.” A poignant statement was made by Teacher #4 about cultural awareness who said that it would be beneficial to “train the general education teachers more so that they don’t perceive them (special education students) as being different.”

Collaboration, communication, and training emerged as a theme because there were fourteen different statements by six different participants throughout the interview that referenced collaboration, communication, and training as a competencies and effective teaching qualities when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 5: Student Self-Belief and Self-Confidence. Table 17 displays each general education teachers' responses, key words, and statements in regards to student self-belief and self-confidence.

Table 17

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Student Self-Belief and Self-Confidence*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 5 – Student Self-Belief and Self-Confidence   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1                         | Knowing how to cultivate a child's belief in themselves   |
| 2                         | Help students to believe in themselves  |
| 3                         | Encourage students to have belief in themselves<br>Confidence in themselves<br>Fostering self-confidence  |
| 4                         | Students need to have confidence<br>Build confidence in the students<br>They need to have that confidence   |
| 5                         | No statements apply   |
| 6                         | Inspire students to believe in themselves<br>Lack of belief in themselves because of minimal success in high school<br>There is a need to build self-confidence in special education students |

Participants felt quite strongly that two of the greatest competencies a general education teacher should cultivate in their special education students are self-belief and self-confidence. Furthermore, participants cite self-belief and self-confidence as reasons why special education students might further their education after high school graduation. Without true self-belief and self-confidence, participants believe, it will be incredibly difficult for a special education student to attend a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school. Teacher #1 supposes

that “knowing how to cultivate a child’s belief in themselves” is crucial for that student to move on to post-secondary education after high school graduation. Similarly, an important quality to cultivate in special education students, according to Teacher #2, is to “help students to believe in themselves.” This statement is akin to that of Teacher #3 who urges general education teachers to “encourage students to have belief in themselves”, and Teacher #6 who said that general education teachers should “inspire (special education) students to believe in themselves.” Furthermore, Teacher #6 warns of the dangers of not cultivating this competency in special education students saying that a “lack of belief in themselves because of minimal success in high school” might lead to them not attending post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school.

Teacher #3, 4, and 6 all also consider that cultivating a sense of self-confidence in their special education students are important competencies and reasons students might have in order to attend post-secondary education after high school graduation. Teacher #3 believes that “fostering self-confidence” is critical for post-secondary plans, and Teacher #4 imagines that special education students need to “have that confidence” if they are to further their studies. One reasons special education students might not attend a post-secondary institution after high school, according to Teacher #6, is because “there is a need to build self-confidence in special education students” while in high school.

Student self-belief and self-confidence emerged as a theme because there were eleven different statements by five different participants throughout the interview that referenced student self-belief and self-confidence as competencies and effective reasons why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 6: Student Self-Advocacy. Table 18 displays each general education teachers' responses, key words, and statements in regards to student self-advocacy.

Table 18

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Student Self-Advocacy*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 6 – Student Self-Advocacy   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1                         | Ability to self-advocate for additional support and help<br>Our students must learn to advocate for themselves<br>We expect them to advocate for themselves |
| 2                         | Urge students to advocate for themselves  |
| 3                         | No statements apply   |
| 4                         | No statements apply   |
| 5                         | Special education students need to self-advocate so they can get extra help   |
| 6                         | Special education students need to be able to self-advocate<br>Self-advocacy is a big factor  |

The critical theme of self-advocacy emerged from participants as they responded to the question about what competencies they believe are crucial for cultivating in special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation. Participants also believe that self-advocacy is an important reason why special education students might attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school. In fact, four out of six participants mentioned self-advocacy when answering those two student-related questions, suggesting that this is an absolutely vital characteristic for special education students as they move through both high school and post-secondary education.

Specifically, Teacher #5 stated that “special education students need to self-advocate so they can get extra help”, while Teacher #1 thinks self-advocacy by special education students is an expectation their whole school has for special education students when stating that “we expect them to advocate for themselves.” Participants, particularly Teacher #1, think that the “ability to self-advocate for additional support and help” is crucial for attendance at post-secondary institutions. Teacher #2 wants all general education teachers to “urge (special education) students to advocate for themselves, and Teacher #6 believes that “special education students need to be able to self-advocate” in order to further their studies after high school graduation.

Student self-advocacy emerged as a theme because there were seven different statements by four different participants throughout the interview that referenced student self-advocacy as a competency and an effective reason why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 7: Encouragement. Table 19 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to encouragement.

Table 19

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Encouragement*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 7 – Encouragement  |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1                         | <p>Encouraging perseverance to access challenging information</p> <p>Genuine encouragement and praise</p> <p>They’re not encouraged, but just get a general sense that the teachers do not believe in them</p> <p>If general education teachers knew that there are people at the charter management organization helping students with future plans, then they might be more encouraging</p> <p>Testimonials from students themselves would be encouraging and valuable</p> |

(continued)

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| General<br>Education<br>Teacher | Theme 7 – Encouragement   |
| 2                               | Encourage self-belief<br>Encourage students to visit high school teachers after graduation<br>Exposure to a lot of adults that encourage and push them to fulfill their potential   |
| 3                               | Encourage students to have belief in themselves<br>Family support and encouragement<br>Lack of family support and encouragement<br>It is important to have expectations that are attainable and encouraging rather than detrimental |
| 4                               | No statements apply   |
| 5                               | No statements apply   |
| 6                               | Family encouragement<br>Minimal encouragement from family and school  |

Encouragement was an overwhelming theme that emerged from participant responses, key words, and statements. Notably, four out of six participants each made several references to the theme of encouragement during responses to four of the interview questions. These particular questions asked participants to consider the competencies general education teachers should cultivate in special education students, the qualities of a successful general education teacher, and reasons why, or why not, a special education student might attend a post-secondary institution after graduation of high school.

Participants believe that the general idea of encouragement, or the act of encouraging students, is critical to the process of inspiring special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after they graduate from high school. Teacher #1 challenges general education teachers to provide special education students with “genuine encouragement and praise” and

believes that hearing “testimonials from students themselves would be encouraging and valuable” to the practice of general education teachers. It is essential for special education students, according to Teacher #2, to have “exposure to a lot of adults that encourage and push them to fulfill their potential.” General “family support and encouragement”, or lack thereof, according to Teacher #3 is a major reason why, or why not, special education students attend post-secondary education institutions after high school graduation. Interestingly, Teacher #3 also believes that a reason special education students might attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation is because they have “expectations that are attainable and encouraging rather than detrimental.” Lastly, Teacher #6 believes that a reason why special education students might not attend post-secondary institutions is because they experience “minimal encouragement” to do so.

Encouragement emerged as a theme because there were fourteen different statements by four different participants throughout the interview that referenced encouragement by the family and the school as a competency and an effective reason why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 8: Support from School and Family. Table 20 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to support from school and family.

Table 20

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Support from School and Family*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 8 – Support from School and Family                         |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1                         | Patience<br>Identifying strategies that help individual students |

(continued)



|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| General Education Teacher | Theme 8 – Support from School and Family  |
|                           | <p>Scaffolding and differentiation</p> <p>Provide information and college and university experience</p> <p>If they are receiving the correct emotional and academic support, I feel like it is highly possible for them to make it through</p> <p>Receive continued support either from the school they're going to or coming back to us</p> <p>Being helped with the application process</p> <p>If they're not helped with the application process</p> |
| 2                         | <p>Understanding the different opportunities that are available after graduation</p> <p>I do believe that in general, special education students have the ability and capability to go to a community college or university after high school, but the difficulty arises from the lack of emotional support after high school.</p> <p>Small schools are able to make connections with students</p> <p>Patience</p>                                      |
| 3                         | <p>Compassion and understanding for special education students</p> <p>Family support and encouragement</p> <p>Lack of family support and encouragement</p>  |
| 4                         | <p>Ability to scaffold and differentiate</p> <p>Willingness to accommodate and modify curriculum</p> <p>Students need to feel supported</p> <p>They didn't have teachers that cared or wanted to build those relationships</p> <p>Small schools give more attention</p> <p>If students are helped/assisted in getting into college</p>  |
| 5                         | <p>Persistence and perseverance is important for general education teacher.</p> <p>Adaptability and flexibility allows teachers to find different ways to teach students</p>  |
| 6                         | <p>Minimal encouragement from family and school</p> <p>Family encouragement</p>   |

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the theme of support from family and school materialized throughout the six interviews with general education teachers. Participants considered, in tremendous frequency and agreement, that support from family and school is a competency that

general education teachers need to cultivate in their special education students, and a significant reason why, or why not, special education students attend post-secondary institutions after high school. Each of the six participants had responses that referenced, in some way, the theme of support from family and school.

Several words including patience, understanding, and compassion emerged when participants referenced the theme of support from family and school. Teacher #3 believes that special education “students need to feel supported” by their family and their school if they are going to be able to attend a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school. Furthermore, Teacher #3 feels that general education teachers need a “compassion and understanding for special education students” if they are to help them realize their future educational goals. Teacher #2 and #4 believe that the small school approach of the charter management organization allows students to feel “connected” and provide students with “more attention.”

Participants also mentioned that the lack of family and school support would adversely impact a special education student from attending a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school. The process of applying for post-secondary education is arduous and Teacher #1 thinks that “if they’re (special education students) not helped with the application process” then they might not attend, but that “if they are receiving the correct emotional and academic support, I feel like it is highly possible for them to make it” to a post-secondary institute after high school graduation. Going further, Teacher #4 thinks that if special education students “didn’t have teachers that cared” then they will have a lot of difficulty furthering their studies after graduation from high school.

Support from family and school emerged as a theme because there were twenty-five different statements by six different participants throughout the interview that referenced the student's family and school providing support as a competency and an effective reason why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 9: Relationships. Table 21 displays each general education teachers' responses, key words, and statements in regards to relationships.

Table 21

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Relationships*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 9 – Relationships   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1                         | Hearing stories about actual students.<br>Testimonials from students themselves would be encouraging and valuable   |
| 2                         | No statements apply   |
| 3                         | Relationship with special education teacher<br>Relationship between teacher and student is very important<br>Relationships between teachers   |
| 4                         | Having a good relationship with the student to understand who they are and let the student know that you care about them<br>They didn't have teachers that cared or wanted to build those relationships<br>Continue to build relationships between general education and special education teachers<br>Share your experiences with the students |
| 5                         | Build relationships with your special education students.<br>Finding out what the student is interested in and what they are good at<br>Find ways to invest special education students in the idea of attending PSIs  |
| 6                         | Strong relationships with students  |

Participants believe that relationships are integral when helping to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school. In their responses to questions about qualities of a successful general education teacher, reasons why special education students would not attend a post-secondary institution, and ways in which the charter management organization can help general education teachers the theme of relationships emerged through responses from five out of six of the participants.

Teacher #3, 4, 5, and 6 believe it is important for the general education teacher to build strong and meaningful relationships with the special education student in order to effectively encourage them to pursue post-secondary education. According to Teacher #5, “finding out what the student is interested in and what they are good at” is important in order to effectively encourage them to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation.” Just as important, but more succinct, Teacher #6 simply says it is important to have “strong relationships with students,” while Teacher #4 said, “having a good relationship with the student to understand who they are and let the student know that you care about them.” The “relationship between teacher and student is very important” for Teacher #3, and Teacher #4 believes that this relationship can be built and nurtured if the general education teacher is willing to “share your experiences with the students.” This type of relationship would be hugely beneficial when speaking to special education student about options after high school graduation. Teacher #1 and 5 think that the charter management organization should, through professional development and training, help to facilitate ways and develop strategies that would benefit general education teachers when looking to build relationships with special education students. Learning how to “find ways to invest special education students in the idea of attending post-secondary institutions” is of significance to Teacher #5.

As well as having a good relationship between the general education teacher and the special education student, teacher #3 and 4 think that it is valuable to have strong relationships between the general education and special education teachers. Participants believe that improving these relationships will ultimately help to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary education. Teacher #3 believes that the general education teacher “relationship with (the) special education teacher” is important, and Teacher #4 urges teachers to “continue to build relationships between general education and special education teachers.”

Relationships emerged as a theme because there were thirteen different statements by five different participants throughout the interview that referenced relationships as a competency and an effective reason why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

Theme 10: Future Goals of Student. Table 4 displays each general education teachers’ responses, key words, and statements in regards to future goals of student.

Table 22

*General Education Teacher Statements Regarding Future Goals of Student*

| General Education Teacher | Theme 10 – Future Goals of Student   |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1                         | <p>If general education teachers knew that there are people at the charter management organization helping students with future plans, then they might be more encouraging</p> <p>They must have a passion for topics and subjects and careers</p> <p>We expect them to pursue their passion</p> |
| 2                         | <p>Talk to students about their future plans</p> <p>Students need to have a plan for after graduation</p> <p>To hear about goals after high school is an important part of the IEP</p>   |

(continued)

| General<br>Education<br>Teacher | Theme 10 – Future Goals of Student  |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 3                               | Technical college is definitely a realistic goal<br>Realistic goals would be for you to go to a community college where they can earn their associates degree. For other students it makes sense to go to a technical college |
| 4                               | No statements apply   |
| 5                               | Important to set goals<br>Apathy is also big reason.  |
| 6                               | No statements apply   |

Future goals of students was a theme that surfaced through participants' responses to questions about reasons why, or why not, special education students would attend post-secondary education after high school graduation, and ways the charter management organization can help general education teachers encourage special education students to attend post-secondary education. Four out of six participants made statements, or had responses, that included the theme of students having goals for their own future, or the school helping them to make those goals.

Teacher #1, 2, 3, and 5 all made statements that reflected the importance of students having goals for after graduation from high school and how these goals were a critical part of the process of ultimately attending, or not attending, post-secondary education after high school graduation. Teacher #1 has an expectation for special education students that "they must have a passion for topics and subjects and careers," while Teacher #2 simply believes it is important to "talk to students about their future plans." Attainable ambitions are critical for Teacher #3 who stated that students should have "realistic goals." Lastly, Teacher #5 echoes Teacher #2 saying

that it is “important to set goals,” but warns that a lack of ambition is dangerous as “apathy is a reason” for special education students not attending post-secondary education.

As it relates to different ways the charter management organization can help general education teachers to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary education, Teacher #1 believes that sharing information about how the charter management organization is “helping students with future plans...then (general education teachers) might be more encouraging.” Furthermore, the IEP process includes a transition plan, and Teacher #2 wants “to hear about goals after high school” within the IEP. This might be something that the charter management organization will be able to provide on a more regular basis.

Future goals of the student emerged as a theme because there were ten different statements by four different participants throughout the interview that referenced the future goals of the student as a competency and an effective reason why special education students might attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school.

**Classification of special education student previously or currently taught.** As was one of the criteria for participation in the study, all of the general education teachers identified themselves as currently teaching, or previously having taught, students that receive special education services. Teacher #3, 4, and 5 are currently teaching, and have only ever taught, special education students receiving support in the resource specialist program (RSP). The other participants, teacher #1, 2, and 6 have experience with special education students in the resource specialist program, but have also previously taught, or are currently teaching, special education students in their general education classroom that receive support in the special day program (SDP).

Table 23

*Responses to Classification(s) of Special Education Students Previously and Currently Taught*

|   | Teacher 1   | Teacher 2   | Teacher 3                  | Teacher 4    | Teacher 5    | Teacher 6  |
|---|---|---|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--|
| Which classification(s) of special education students are you teaching, or have you taught? (RSP / SDP) | Majority of special education students are RSP<br><br>Taught SDP students in past years | Majority of students are RSP<br><br>Co-teaching a class with SDP students | Only teaching RSP students | RSP students | RSP students | Mostly RSP students<br><br>Have taught SDP students previously |

**Responses to special education students furthering their education after high school.**

Table 24 summarizes the responses pertaining to the interview questions that specifically concern general education teachers' belief in special education students attending post-secondary institutions. As a reminder those questions are listed below:

- Question #5-How do general education teachers in this organization feel about special education students attending post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school?
- Question #6-How do you feel about special education students from this organization attending post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school?
- Question #9-What expectation do general education teachers in this organization have for special education students upon their graduation from high school?



Table 24

*Responses to Special Education Students Attending Post-Secondary Institutions after High School Graduation*

| Question | Teacher 1                     | Teacher 2                         | Teacher 3                     | Teacher 4                     | Teacher 5                     | Teacher 6                     |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 5        | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | No –<br>unlikely to<br>attend PSI | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College |
| 6        | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College     | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College |
| 9        | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | No –<br>unlikely to<br>attend PSI | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College | Yes –<br>Community<br>College |

When participants were posed direct questions about their belief, and the belief of their peers, of future attendance at post-secondary institutions by special education students after high school graduation, five out of six teachers responded positively. The responses were considered positive if participants responded that they believe that attendance at post-secondary institutions by special education students is possible. Overall responses differed slightly for each of the three questions, however, teacher #1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were consistent in their responses.

Participants were asked specifically about how they believe that their general education colleagues feel about special education students attending post-secondary education. Teacher #1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 all think that their general education colleagues believe that special education students will attend community college, but not 4-year universities. Teacher #1 said that on campus “believing in all students’ potential is evident,” with Teacher #3 emulating that sentiment by saying that “our teachers embody that mission and feel like they are preparing students for college and life after high school.” While still responding in the affirmative, Teacher #4 stated that “I believe that my colleagues feel like special education students can survive

college,” Teacher #5 simply said that “they (special education students) can go to college,” and Teacher #6 said that general education teachers on the campus “believe that they (special education students) can attend a post-secondary institute.” Only Teacher #2 responded in the negative to this question. This participant feels that general education teachers in the charter management organization believe it is unlikely that special education students will attend post-secondary education, saying that “most (general education teachers) believe that college is unrealistic.”

After answering the question about their general education colleagues, participants responded to a question about how they, personally, feel about special education students’ future attendance at post-secondary institutions. Intriguingly, all six teachers responded positively to this question, where only five teachers responded positively to the previous question. Teacher #1 relayed their own experience saying that “students in my class with learning disabilities have gone onto a post-secondary education institution.” Teacher #2, who answered the previous question negatively, believes that “special education students have the ability and capability to go to a community college.” Realism was again mentioned by Teacher #3 who said that “technical college is definitely a realistic goal”, while Teacher #4 was more firm saying that “they (special education students) can attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school.” A caveat was thrown out by Teacher #5 who said that “some of my students would really struggle in post-secondary education, but most of them would succeed.” Lastly, Teacher #6 unequivocally stated that special education students are “more likely to go to a community college than a 4-year university.”

Participants were also asked what expectations general education teachers have for special education students after graduation from high school. Overwhelmingly, participants

responded that general education teachers believe special education students will attend post-secondary institution upon high school graduation. Only Teacher #2 responded that “most general education teachers would expect that they (special education students) would get a job.” Teacher #3 stated that “realistic goals would be for you to go to a community college where they can earn their associates degree. For other students it makes sense to go to a technical college” and Teacher #4 believes that special education students “will do fine once they are there” if they get a little help with the application process. Teacher #5 hoped that they “move onto a trade in a post-secondary institution,” and Teacher #6 expected that special education students would “learn a skill at a post-secondary institution.”

Throughout the whole interview teacher #1, #3, and #5 all consistently made statements that they, and their general education colleagues, did not treat special education students differently from general education students. Specifically, Teacher #1 said that “these are expectations I have for every one of my students. It’s interesting to think that we would have different expectations for our students with special needs.” Earlier on in the interview, Teacher #1 made a comment about her school culture when saying there is “a belief system (on campus) that shows special education students can achieve and do well after graduation.” Similarly, Teacher #3 believes that “the majority of people work at charter management organizations because of their unwavering belief that every student should be college ready when they graduate high school.” This sentiment is shared by Teacher #5 who said that general education teachers “don’t feel differently about general education and special education students”, that “special education students and general education students are not much different”, and that attending a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school “is not an ‘or’ thing it’s an ‘and’ thing.”

## Chapter Summary

All six of the general education teachers that participated in the study work at different charter high schools within the same urban charter management organization. All of the participants have experience teaching, or are currently teaching, special education students that receive support in the resource specialist program (RSP). Three of the participants have experience teaching, or are currently teaching, special education students that receive support in the special day program (SDP).

The research question that guided this study and the data collection through interview questions sought to reveal the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of special education students. Responses generated by the six general education teacher participants yielded a variety of answers that the researcher, through the practice of coding, was ultimately able to categorize into ten different themes. The themes that emerged were flexibility, care, teacher belief in student, collaboration, communication, and training, student self-belief and self-confidence, student self-advocacy, relationships, encouragement, support from family and school, and future goals of student.

Flexibility emerged as a theme because participants noted that it was especially important for the general education teacher to be willing to plan effectively when teaching special education students. This theme of flexibility emerged through participant responses specifically when they mentioned the necessary accommodation and modification of general education curriculum for special education students. Participants noted several times that the need to accommodate and modify curriculum is crucial to have success when educating students with learning disabilities.

Care emerged as a theme because participants think it is vital that general education teachers show their students-through words, actions, and rapports – that they care about them as individuals. A general education teacher without these qualities, according to respondents, will not be successful at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions

Teacher belief in student emerged as a theme because participants suppose general education teachers will be effective at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions if they have a genuine belief in their students. The participants that mentioned how important having a belief in students is when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions also made reference to the fact that the belief in the potential of all students is part of the mission of the charter management organization.

Collaboration, communication, and training emerged as a theme because participants believe that there is much for general education teachers to learn about how to appropriately educate special education students. Participants believe that there should be a greater emphasis on opportunities for collaboration between general education and special education teachers. They also think that communication between teachers and students, communication within school structures, and communication between the school and the charter management organization can be improved and more transparent in reference to district wide goals. Finally, all respondents believe that more comprehensive training and professional development should be provided to general education teachers so that they might improve their own practice as it pertains to encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions.

Student self-belief and self-confidence emerged as a theme because participants believe that without true self-belief and self-confidence it will be incredibly difficult for a special education student to attend a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school.

Participants strongly agree that cultivating self-belief and self-confidence in special education students it is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of any general education teacher. Furthermore, they consider self-belief and self-confidence as a major deciding factor for students when choosing to pursue education after high school.

Student self-advocacy emerged as a theme because participants suggest it is an essential quality for special education students as they move through both high school and post-secondary education. Participants believe it is the role of the general education teacher, and the school overall, to help students advocate for themselves in order to obtain adequate and necessary recourses and supports throughout high school, during the application process for post-secondary education institutions, and while attending post-secondary institutions.

Encouragement emerged as a theme because participants believe that the general idea of encouragement, or the act of encouraging students, is key to the process of inspiring special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after they graduate from high school. Participants also feel that if encouragement, in any facet, to attend a post-secondary institution is lacking, then it is highly unlikely for that special education student to seek to attend higher education.

Support from school and family emerged as a theme because participants considered, in tremendous frequency and agreement, that support from family and school is an important competency that general education teachers need to cultivate in their special education students, and a significant reason why, or why not, special education students attend post-secondary institutions after high school. Several words including patience, understanding, and compassion emerged when participants referenced the theme of support from family and school. Participants

also mentioned that the absence of family and school support would adversely impact a special education student from attending a post-secondary institution after graduation from high school.

Relationships emerged as a theme because participants believe that relationships are integral when helping to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school. Participants feel that in order for a special education student to ultimately attend a post-secondary education institution, there are several relationships that need to flourish. Firstly, the relationship between the general education teacher and the special education student is important for support and encouragement. Secondly, the relationship between the general education teacher and the special education teacher is important for collaboration and communication. Lastly, the relationship between the school and the charter management organization is important for adequate training.

Future goals of students emerged as a theme because participants believe that it is imperative for special education students to have goals for after graduation from high school and that these goals are a critical part of the process of ultimately attending, or not attending, post-secondary education after high school graduation. Participants also think that if they were more aware of these goals, then they would better help the student to achieve them.

Finally, as it pertains to the responses, key words, and statements participants made when answering the interview questions that specifically concern general education teachers' belief in special education students attending post-secondary institutions, it is clear that the majority of participants believe that special education students are able to attend post-secondary education institutions after high school graduation. When answering questions about their general education colleagues, five out of six participants believe that the general education teachers in the charter management organization feel like special education students are able to attend

community college or the equivalent, such as a vocational or trade school. Furthermore, when answering questions about their own perception of future attendance at a post-secondary education institution by a special education student, six out of six participants believe that special education students are able to attend a community college or the equivalent. It is important to state, however, that none of the participants mentioned that the belief a special education student is able to attend a 4-year university.

The final chapter will compare the study findings and themes to the literature, generate conclusions and implications of this study, and suggest recommendations for future policy, practice, and research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Effectively educating special education students demands a particular set of skills, knowledge, and temperament. This is even more true for the general education teachers tasked with instructing special education students in their classroom in what the IDEA (1990) deems as



the least restrictive environment. As a result, general education teachers share a large part of the responsibility of educating special education students and the success that they might, or might not, ultimately achieve. When IDEA (1990) came in to effect in the early 1990s, an adjustment to how special education students were instructed began to take place. In the years since it was signed into law, IDEA (1990), in conjunction with NCLB (2001), has provided schools and districts with more resources for and information about effectively educating special education students throughout their academic careers than has ever before been available. Although recent years have shown there to be a higher rate of college attendance by special education students, Oesterreich and Knight (2008) have noted that there is currently an underrepresentation in college attendance of special education students. It is now the responsibility of the schools and the districts to appropriately use those resources and information to ensure special education students reach their own future academic goals, which are included, but not limited to the attendance at post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school.

How teachers perceive their students, both academically and behaviorally, is an important factor in how teachers ultimately educate their students. Ample evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Romanowski (1997) believes that each teacher has an individual belief system. A teacher's individual belief system influences all of their decisions that are related to education including how to grade assignments, how to manage classrooms, and how to create curriculum. Several studies have found a connection between teachers' attitudes and the instructional effort that they direct towards students with diverse learning and behavioral characteristics (Cook & Cameron, 2010; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Teacher belief systems, as a whole, play an important role in the education of all students. However, it is

essential to understand that an individual's belief system might be altered for different subgroups of students. In this case, the belief system of a teacher might be different for general education students than it is for special education students.

There has been extensive research on the discrepancy between the qualities of education received by students in urban areas versus students in suburban areas (Lankford et al., 2002; Larson-Billings, 1995; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2001; Williams, 1996). Urban school districts have a much more diverse population of students, and Darling-Hammond (1997) believes that if urban school districts do not adjust their curriculum and pedagogy to factor in the needs and lived experiences of urban learners, their schools will continue to become even less effective. On standardized tests, students in urban school districts score lower, on average, than students in suburban school districts (Jacob, 2007). Research has also shown that urban schools have lower skilled teachers that are underprepared and have lower expectations for their students than their suburban counterparts (Lankford et al., 2002). Children from urban settings who desperately need teachers that are both highly proficient and exceptionally compassionate receive their education in an environment that is most difficult to attract these types of educators (Sharpton et al., 2002). For many years, educators and policy makers have struggled to adequately tackle the poor academic standing of school-age children in urban environments and the overall achievement gap between students in urban and suburban areas. As educational professionals grapple with the demands of this perpetually expanding achievement gap, research shows that students in suburban areas perform at a basic proficiency level at 50% more frequency than students in urban areas in the United States (Lankford et al., 2002).

One possible reason for low performance levels is the expectations teachers have for the students. Kett (1977) believes that minority students fail to live up to teacher expectations and find themselves at an immediate disadvantage. Research shows that teachers in urban areas hold their students to low expectations. Furthermore, these teachers have then used grades and tests scores to make judgements on students' academic and behavioral potential (R. Ferguson, 2003). Urban teachers do not believe that their students are capable of mastering the necessary critical-thinking skills needed to access general curriculum, and that this might be due to these students entering school with low-level and deficient academic language and vocabulary (Song & Christiansen, 2001).

The overall purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. This qualitative, phenomenological study used a comparative, cross-sectional strategy in which a phenomenological method employing semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of general education teachers in an urban charter high school with regards to special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions. Phenomenological research requires that data is collected from participants who are experiencing the phenomenon. For this study, the researcher interviewed six general education teachers to gain an understanding of their lived experiences.

The following research question guided this study:

- What are the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of urban charter high school general education teachers in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions of special education students?

In this final chapter, an assessment of the study's findings will be compared and contrasted with the research from the literature. Implications of this study and recommendations based on the study for future policy, practice, and research will also be presented. Lastly, recommendations for future research will also be provided.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

Participant responses to the research question resulted in a variety of key findings. Firstly, responses revealed that general education teachers personally believe that special education students can attend post-secondary education institutions, and that general education teachers think that their general education colleagues also believe that special education students can attend post-secondary education institutions. These responses were made specifically in reference to future attendance at community colleges and trade, or vocational schools, as opposed to four-year universities. Secondly, participants believe that, in order to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation, general education teachers must cultivate flexibility, care, and a belief in students within their own teaching style. Thirdly, general education teachers believe it is necessary to cultivate self-belief, self-confidence, and self-advocacy in their special education students in order to effectively encourage them to further their education after graduation from high school. Lastly, participants think that encouragement and support from the school and the family, relationships between general education teachers and special education students, and the future goals of special education students are reasons why, or why not, special education students might attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation.

**General education teachers believe that special education students can attend post-secondary education institutions.** Participants overwhelmingly believe that special education

students that attend high schools within the Southern California charter management organization are able to pursue higher education after graduation. In fact, this is actually an expectation that general education teachers have for their special education students. Importantly, it should be noted that participants believe special education students are more likely to attend community colleges and vocational, or trade, schools than four-year universities. This finding suggests that when general education teachers hold their special education students to high expectations, more of those special education students might attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation. Furthermore, this belief is consistent with the model of differentiated expectations theory of holding general education and special education students to the same expectations.

Extensive research has shown that attendance at post-secondary education institutions is unlikely for special education students. Even though the statistics are not particularly encouraging, students with learning disabilities are breaking records for both high school graduation and attendance at 4-year universities (Henderson, 2001; Houck, Engelhard, & Geller, 1989; Hughes & Smith, 1990; Mangrum & Strichart, 1988; Scott & Berger, 1993). However, Wagner et al. (2005) showed that approximately 10% of students with disabilities have attended a 2-year community college, and only about 5% of students with disabilities have attended a 4-year university. Participants in this study, nevertheless, still believe that special education students who attend a high school within the Southern California charter management organization will attend a post-secondary education institution. In fact, the data suggests that this belief is not only exceptionally strong, but also a total expectation general education teachers have for special education students at the school sites.

Several participants rejected the notion that they should have different expectations for their special education students in comparison to their general education students, believing it is important to have high expectations for all of their students, regardless of disability. This compelling conviction is consistent with the model of differentiated expectations theory that intimates that general education teachers hold similar expectations for special education students with mild disabilities as they do for students with no disabilities (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010). Furthermore, the model of differentiated expectations says that nondisabled students and students with mild disabilities are treated the same by general education teachers because they do not look any different from each other. Cook (2004) has found that general education teachers tend to set academic and behavioral goals for students with mild disabilities that are comparable to general education students. Considering that, overall, participants believe special education students can attend post-secondary institutions just like their non-learning disabled peers, it is logical to make the connection between participant responses and the model of differentiated expectations.

**Competencies general education teachers must cultivate in their own teaching style.**

There are four important competencies that participants believe general education teachers in the Southern California charter management organization must cultivate in their own teaching style to effectively encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school. The characteristics that participants deemed as vital are flexibility when planning for the instruction of special education students, care when interacting with special education students, a full and genuine belief in the potential of special education students, and an ability to effectively communicate, collaborate, and implement strategies and methods learned at training and professional development.

***Flexibility.*** Participant responses suggest that they view the qualities of being a flexible, adaptable, and open teacher as extremely important when working with special education students. This shared viewpoint stems mainly from the understanding that it is their responsibility, as general education teachers, to appropriately accommodate and modify curriculum as it is outlined in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Faculty and staff, including the school psychologist, and school administrators, implement the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and specialized instruction after the IEP meeting is held (Hadley, 2011). As general education teachers work to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary institutions, respondents believe that general education teachers must be prepared to meet their responsibilities for every student. It is critical to remember that teacher self-efficacy and the tolerance theory both play a major part in a teachers' willingness to be flexible in order to plan suitable accommodations and modifications for their special education students.

Bandura (1997) believes that levels of self-efficacy, or how much a person believes they will have success when performing a task, can show how motivated someone might be to perform that task. People are more likely to exert energy and consistently persist through difficult tasks and challenges when they believe their actions will result in preferred results. A large factor in being flexible when appropriately planning for the instruction of special education students is the belief that the extra planning will be successful. Pajares (1996) has found that people are more confident in themselves when they have greater self-efficacy. This suggests that general education teachers who believe that they are successfully accommodating and modifying curriculum for their special education students will do so more frequently.

Teachers that are unable, or unwilling, to modify and accommodate curriculum in order to better support special education students might be doing so unintentionally due to the

tolerance theory. This line of thought maintains that all teachers have an instructional tolerance, or a limit in the ability to address student academic and behavioral instructional needs. Due to the tolerance theory, Gerber (1988) thinks that the teacher is unable to completely meet the instructional needs of all the students. This is not necessarily surprising because general education teachers are often unsure of how to manage the needs and supports of diverse students in general education settings (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Dymond, Rengzaglia, & Chun, 2008), and research has shown that while almost two-thirds of general education teachers support inclusion, less than half actually agreed with concepts that make up the idea of inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Throughout the interviews, participants made reference to flexibility as a competency a general education teacher needs to cultivate in their teaching style to effectively encourage a special education student to pursue higher education. Specifically, participant mentioned the need to appropriately modify and accommodate curriculum so that special education students are receiving the supports they require to be academically successful. Flexibility is the willingness to provide these supports, and self-efficacy in the practice is the belief that the supports provided are effective. As such, the research seems to affirm the data because teachers are more likely to implement strategies when they feel those strategies will be successful. The flexibility general education teachers exhibit when implementing modification and accommodation strategies is an example that, at least some degree, those teachers have self-efficacy in the implementation of the strategy. The flexibility needed to be willing to try new pedagogical strategies in order to better support students with learning disabilities can be considered to fall within the frame of teacher self-efficacy.



*Care.* Most of the students attending the schools within the charter management organization where these general education teachers work are minority students from low-income families that face a variety of socio-economic challenges. For respondents to identify care as a fundamental component and an effective quality used by successful general education teachers when encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions suggests that the respondents are fully aware of the challenges that the students, and in turn the school, encounter on a daily basis. Care is an important competency for general education teachers from a Southern California charter management organization to foster in their own teaching style because students in urban areas are performing at much lower academic levels than their suburban peers and because the tolerance theory suggests that general education teachers might unintentionally dismiss special education students.

General education teachers working at a high school within a Southern California urban charter management organization already face profound academic and behavioral challenges with their students. Research shows that students in suburban areas perform at a basic proficiency level at 50% more frequency than students in urban areas in the United States (Lankford et al., 2002). These academic performance levels are much lower for special education students within the same areas. Urban students, overall, face many challenges that are out of their control such as the discrepancy between the qualities of education received by students in urban areas versus students in suburban areas (Lankford et al., 2002), which might be caused by the fact that researchers have found that almost half of all new teachers who start their career in urban school districts leave within three to five years (Howey, 2002). Georgiou et al. (2002) found that if students are struggling with certain subject-specific content, then teachers are more likely to alter their behavior and dealings with those students.

The tolerance theory plays a large part in the perception of care as an important characteristic for general education teachers to cultivate in their own teaching style. The tolerance theory suggests that some students, often special education students, will always fall out of the range of a teachers' instructional tolerance. Simply, some teachers might never be able to effectively instruct some of their students. Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley (2007) believe that special education students in an inclusive classroom usually make up a large portion of all students that might fall outside of a teacher's instructional tolerance. According to Cook, Gerber, and Semmel (1997), this factor of the tolerance theory might leave teachers unintentionally dismissing certain student needs because those needs are not within the teacher's instructional tolerance.

Participants believe that if general education teachers work without a genuine care and concern for special education students, then those students will most likely fail to meet expectations of general education teachers. Responses from participants suggested that they are keenly aware of the challenges urban, minority students experience throughout their academic career, and of the difficulties the teachers face in the same settings. Certainly, participants think, that future attendance at post-secondary institutions is not possible if general education teachers do not display care for their special education students. This belief is in loose agreement with the research. If teachers are unable to effectively instruct students because they fall outside of the teacher's instructional tolerance, then that teacher might be perceived to not care about those students. If the student has a perception that the teacher does not care about them, then that student might be less likely to attend post-secondary education after high school graduation.

***Teacher belief in students.*** Participants wholeheartedly believe that it is essential for a general education teacher to have a “philosophical belief that all students can attend college.”

General education teachers in the Southern California charter management organization understand that all students, especially special education students, learn differently, but that it is vital to “believe in the potential of all students.” Without this teacher belief, it might prove to be exceedingly difficult to encourage special education students to attend post-secondary educational institutions after graduation from high school. Participants believe that if a general education teacher sets high expectations for special education students, and believes that those students are able to meet those expectations, then attendance at a college or university is indeed a realistic and achievable goal for every student.

Research has shown that teachers’ lived experiences, their perceptions of the world, and their belief systems impact their understanding of the content material and the strategies that they use in their classroom (Romanowski, 1997). Plenty of evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Christenson & Ysseldyke, 1989; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The perception of teachers might be influenced by their beliefs for students’ capabilities and their expectations for students’ academic and behavioral achievements (Babad, 2005; Reyna, 2000). At the time that students identify as being learning disabled, they are also labelled under the umbrella of disabled. This label might negatively influence the beliefs and anticipations that a faculty member may have for that student (Baker et al., 2012).

The majority of students attending high schools within the Southern California charter management organization are minority students. Kett (1977) believes that minority students fail to live up to teacher expectations and find themselves at an immediate disadvantage. Research shows that teachers in urban areas have held their students to low expectations (R. Ferguson, 2003). Urban teachers do not believe that their students are capable of mastering the necessary

critical-thinking skills needed to access general curriculum, and that this might be due to these students entering school with low-level and deficient academic language and vocabulary (Song & Christiansen, 2001). On the other hand, however, the model of differentiated expectations says, with respect to students with mild disabilities, that teachers may set goals and expect improvement in academic areas that are consistent with those held for modal students, assuming that if the child just 'tried harder', then he or she could perform as well as non-disabled students (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Moreover, Cook (2004) has found that general education teachers tend to set academic and behavioral goals for students with mild disabilities that are comparable to general education students.

Participants in the study believe that when general education teachers set high goals, have high expectations, and believe in the ability of special education students, those students are then more encouraged to attend post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school. While the research agrees that when a teacher has a strong belief in their students, the students are more likely to perform positively, it also says that general education teachers tend to have lower expectations for special education students. This is emphasized because the research says that as most of the special education students in the Southern California charter management organization are minority, the general education teachers within the organization will have lower expectations for their students. Data for this study, however, disagrees with this sentiment. Participants consistently stated that they, and their general education colleagues, hold their special education students to the same expectation students as their general education students. In order to truly encourage special education students to further pursue their studies general education teachers must have a "genuine belief in their students" academic and behavioral abilities. The only area where this matches up with the research is as it pertains to the

model of differentiated expectations. Teachers tend to, according to the model, hold students with mild learning disabilities to the same expectations as students without learning disabilities.

***Collaboration, communication, and training.*** Responses that allowed this finding to emerge suggest that participants require more support from their colleagues, their school leadership, and the charter management organization as it relates to appropriately and effectively educating special education students, but particularly as it concerns encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions. This support might be provided in a variety of strategies and best practices, but can be most efficiently implemented through transparent communication, meaningful collaboration, and timely and focused professional development.

The research on collaboration, communication, and training says that general education teachers who have a strong sense of self-belief in their own capabilities are more likely to implement new pedagogical strategies. Specifically, Morrison et al. (1994) thinks that teachers with higher levels of confidence in their own practice often are more likely to apply new learning gained in training and professional development. Furthermore, it has been shown that general education teachers of special education students are more willing to implement research-based best-practices for inclusion if they believe that they are successful in teaching special education students. Brownell & Pajares (1999) suggest that teachers are more likely to apply any pedagogical strategy if they believe that it will allow them to be more effective in the classroom.

Research also proposes that general education teachers require more training specifically as it relates to the instruction of special education students. Villarreal (2002), for instance, noted that many faculty members do not know how and when to effectively implement accommodations and modifications for their learning disabled students. Muller (2006) described

a tendency on the part of instructors to avoid working with students with learning disabilities because they do not feel like they have the proper skills to adequately educate these students. Moreover, Milson (2002) does not believe that general education teachers know enough to adequately support these students to get to post-secondary institutions. Baker et al. (2012), on the other hand, found that less than 20% of faculty attend professional development opportunities to increase knowledge on how to best educate students with learning disabilities even though over half of faculty stated that such trainings are available on the campus.

In accordance with much of the research, results from the data collection show that general education teachers within the Southern California charter management organization desperately want more training as it relates to the instruction of special education students. Participants believe that, in order to be more successful at teaching special education students, they need additional support and resources that are aimed at this area of instruction. Several ways that the general education teachers suggest this might be accomplished is if there is greater collaboration on offer between general education and special education teachers. Working in collaboration, according to participants, will only serve to produce a greater emphasis on improved instruction of special education students. Additionally, participants want an improvement of communication from both school leadership and the charter management organization as it relates to educating students with learning disabilities. Improved and more transparent communication, as requested by participants, is not necessarily supported by the research, however, it might be considered to be inherent to the suggestion of more frequent training on the instruction of special education students.

**Competencies general education teachers must cultivate in special education students.** There are two important competencies that participants believe general education

teachers in the Southern California charter management organization must cultivate in their special education students to effectively encourage them to attend post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school. The characteristics that participants deemed as vital are self-belief and self-confidence in their own academic and behavioral abilities, and self-advocacy in order to receive the adequate resources and supports crucial for their success.

***Self-Belief and Self-Confidence.*** Participant responses that resulted in the emergence of this finding suggest that general education teachers think that low self-belief and self-confidence are a hindrance to future attendance at a post-secondary institution. Therefore, general education teachers within the Southern California charter management organization believe that it is their responsibility to cultivate self-belief and self-confidence in their special education students in order for the students to feel encouraged to pursue higher education.

Research on the self-belief and self-confidence of special education students is plentiful. Special education students tend to have lower beliefs in themselves academically (Gans et al., 2003) and lower self-esteem in general (Rosenthal, 1973). Additionally, McPhail and Stone (1995) believe that, as it pertains to academics, special education students tend to have a lower self-perception than general education students. Stone (1997) suggests reasons why special education students might have a low academic self-perception is impacted by their academic records that show poor achievement throughout school, and a perceived negative bias against them on the school campuses through their categorization as a special education student. Lastly, various research studies have found that special education students have more issues socially, emotionally, and motivationally than general education students (Chapman, 1988; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2001).

Throughout the interview process, participants believed that it is important, and necessary, to cultivate self-belief and self-confidence in special education students in order to encourage them to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation. The research says that special education students tend to have lower self-belief and self-confidence, and the participants are aware that these are areas they are responsible for improving within the student. Participants know that it is highly unlikely for any student, particularly a special education student, to pursue higher education after graduation from high school if that student lacks self-belief and self-confidence. By making these assertions, participants acknowledge that they are cognizant of the limitations special education students might possess in reference to their self-belief and self-confidence.

***Self-Advocacy.*** The emergence of self-advocacy as a finding suggests that the participants are overtly aware of the broad services and support special education students receive during high school. General education teachers within the Southern California charter management organization believe that it is their responsibility to cultivate self-advocacy in their special education students in order for the students to continue to receive the resources they require to feel encouraged to pursue higher education.

Research on the characteristic of self-advocacy in special education students currently attending post-secondary educational institutions says that, for the most part, this competency is lacking. A major difference between secondary education and post-secondary education for students with learning disabilities is that while high school students automatically receive services, college students are responsible for asking to receive services at post-secondary education institutions (Hadley, 2011). After high school, the responsibilities of securing eligibility documentation and advocating for accommodations falls squarely on students'



shoulders, as the legal protections of K-12's IDEA (2004) no longer apply at the post-secondary level. The United States Department of Education (2007) explained: "Each postsecondary institution must provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability" (p. 2). The voluntary disclosure of personal information relating to a learning disability is relatively unlikely, as only 40% of students with disabilities reported themselves as having a learning disability (Henderson, 2001). A variety of paperwork is required in order to complete this process that includes documentation of the disability, accommodations needed, self-advocacy to the faculty instructors on campus, and thorough involvement in the services that are available to support achievement (Hadley, 2011). If students decide not to divulge that they received special education services at the secondary level, they inadvertently put themselves in a less than optimal situation as they most likely will not be afforded any necessary accommodations at the post-secondary level (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

The responses regarding self-advocacy from participants during the interview process align strongly with the plethora of research on self-advocacy. Participants believe that it is absolutely vital to cultivate the competency of their self-advocacy in their special education students. Responses were, however, limited to encouraging self-advocacy at the high school level in the form of asking questions about support and resources, and being aware of the stipulations of their own IEP and the requirements for their education therein. Nonetheless, participants believe that learning these skills during their high school years will only serve to benefit special education students when they begin to attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation.

### **Reasons special education students might attend post-secondary institutions.**

Participants believe that there are three important reasons why special education students who

graduate from high schools in the Southern California charter management organization may, or may not, attend post-secondary institutions after high school graduation. The reasons that participants deemed as vital are encouragement and support from their school and their family, positive and meaningful relationships between the general education teacher and the special education student, and the future goals of the special education student as it pertains to life after high school.

***Encouragement and Support.*** Responses that allowed this finding to emerge suggest that participants think that encouragement and support are important reasons why special education students are encouraged to pursue future attendance at a post-secondary institution.

Putnam (2000) argues that poor “social capital” – the unofficial networks within a community that provides support to people within that community – is generally more evident in inner-city neighborhoods. From a community perspective, the encouragement and support of special education students, is apparently lacking. This often results in urban schools having a great disparity of resources available to students and teachers (Jacobs, 2007). The lack of resources is even more detrimental when one considers the huge social constructs that special education, minority students within their neighborhood. It is also evident from the research that in order to adequately prepare students with learning disabilities for college, they must have access to rigorous classes, they must learn a variety of study skills, and they must master their own strategies for learning (Cowen, 1993; Gajar et al., 1993; Scott & Berger, 1993; Skinner, 1998). Many urban schools lack the resources and funding to provide students with these opportunities. Furthermore, the perception of faculty support, positively or negatively, might absolutely shape the academic performance of students with learning disabilities (Allsopp et al., 2005; Troiano, 2003; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Nonetheless, researchers believe

that students with learning disabilities receive a variety of benefits from learning in a general education classroom that include them interacting with positive peer role models, learning appropriate behavior, improving their language development, and building self-esteem (Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Staub, Schwartz, Galluci, & Peck 1994).

Participants definitely agree with the research that encouragement and support are vital reasons special education students might consider whether or not to pursue higher education. Of course, it is clear that participants have somewhat of a different idea of the types of encouragement and support necessary. Responses to the interview questions suggest that participants focused their ideas more on positive interactions between the family, school, and student. Specifically, if the teacher verbally encourages and supports the student to attend post-secondary education, then that might be a reason why the student decides to pursue higher education. The research, however, focuses more on the structures that the school sets in place to make it possible for the student to apply to attend post-secondary education. Certainly the verbal encouragement and support is very necessary, but as the research suggests, the policies that the school and the district institute are just as important.

***Relationships between general education teacher and special education student.*** This finding resulted in participant responses that suggest relationships are important reasons why special education students are encouraged to pursue future attendance at a post-secondary institution.

Individual interactions between teachers and students that are for an educational purpose, like teaching skills, are extremely useful for developing positive relationships and overall student learning outcomes (Brophy, 1986). Kemp and Carter (2002) found that general education teachers might have more interactions, both academic and behavioral, with students with

learning disabilities than students without learning disabilities. However, these students have reported having generally more negative relationships with teachers (Gallagher, 2002) and higher levels of isolation from the teacher and the school (Seidel & Vaughn, 1991). One of the more powerful perceptions that arose from Kortering and Braziel's (1999) work is that special education students who did not complete high school felt like teachers needed to adjust their own attitudes and biases towards students like them in order for the students to feel like they might have a better chance to graduate from high school.

Participants undoubtedly believe that practice of fostering positive relationships between general education teachers and special education students is critically important for ultimately encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary institutions. Certainly, this sentiment is in accordance with some of the research that says positive relationships are important for the success of special education students. Positive relationships between the student and the teacher are a good indicator of future success at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Interestingly, however, it appears as though much of the other research indicates special education students perceive relationships with general education teachers and the school as being negative. This consideration is not something that the participants mentioned in any capacity throughout the interview process. Their responses were limited to understanding that positive relationships will eventually be beneficial when special education students decide to pursue higher education or not.

***Future goals of special education student.*** Responses that allowed this finding to emerge suggest that participants think that encouragement and support are important reasons why special education students are inspired to pursue future attendance at a post-secondary institution.

There is limited research regarding the future goals of special education students currently available. One of the few areas where future goals and plans are mentioned in the literature is in regards to the transition plan within the IEP. Cameron and Cook (2013) note that there is a direct relationship between the goals and expectations held by teachers and their behaviors towards individual students because it is the rationale behind the use of measurable goals and objectives in Individual Education Programs (IEPs), which are seen as a cornerstone of effective special education practice. Furthermore, Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) believe that general education teachers, and the school as a whole, must “become facilitators of the transition from high school to college” (p. 133) for special education students.

In contrast to the research, participant responses identified future goals of special education students to a much greater degree. General education teachers in the Southern California charter management organization strongly believe that if a special education student within the organization has aspirations to attend post-secondary education institutions, then they are much more likely to make attendance a reality. Specifically, general education teachers believe that wanting to pursue higher education is a major reason why, or why not, special education students go to college and university.

## **Conclusions**

Three conclusions were extracted from the findings related to the data collected through the interview process. Firstly, the general education teacher must believe in the potential of the special education student and their ability to attend a post-secondary education institution. Secondly, the school and the charter management organization must provide adequate training and collaboration opportunities to general education teachers in order to provide them with the pedagogical skills necessary to appropriately support special education students. Thirdly, the

special education student must have the self-belief and the self-confidence required to attend a post-secondary education institution after high school graduation.

**Teacher belief in student.** General education teachers working at high schools within the Southern California charter management organization believe that special education students can attend post-secondary education institutions after graduation from high school. Evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Seemingly, students internalize the goals that are set for them. If teachers set high goals, the impact on individual student morale might be high. Alternatively, when teachers set low goals for their students, morale might be negatively affected. Each of the general education teachers within the charter management organization has a belief system that directly influences their daily interaction with special education students and the goals they set for those students.

Some of the ways that a general education teacher might exhibit to a special education student that they believe in them is by displaying a caring attitude that is based on the foundation of a positive relationship that ultimately encourages and supports the student. Any time a general education teacher is unintentionally, or intentionally, dismissing the academic and behavioral needs of a student, that teacher is effectively displaying a lack of care and attention to that student. A display of this nature, and the absence of this characteristic, will, according to participants who urge general education teachers to “teach with love” and to “care and show students that they want them to do better”, result in special education students not attending post-secondary education after high school graduation. General education teachers in urban settings that do not care about their students, especially special education students, that have traditionally under-performed their suburban peers and who need the most academic and behavior support,

will certainly struggle to adequately encourage those same special education students to attend a post-secondary education institution after high school graduation.

The only way for a general education teacher to begin to show a special education student that they care about them is if they have a positive relationship. General education teachers need to carefully build and nurture relationships with their special education students at all times in order to effectively communicate that they “care and (want to) show students that they want them to do better.” Without that positive relationship that is developed over a period of time, the perpetual encouragement and support given to the special education student by the general education teacher might not be effective. However, if a positive relationship exists, that is based on care and a belief in the students’ abilities, then the student knows that the encouragement and the support is genuine, and given as an attempt to aid and help the student.

**Collaboration, Communication, and training.** Currently, there are several practices not occurring at the school site level and the district level that are precluding general education teachers from being as successful as possible at encouraging special education students to attend post-secondary education institutions. Firstly, at the school site there is not enough collaboration taking place between general education and special education teachers. The two sets of teachers are working in isolation of each other, and this is seriously hindering the future college and university attendance by special education students. Secondly, there is not enough adequate and appropriate professional development and training being presented to general education students regarding how to properly modify and accommodate curriculum for special education students. Furthermore, strategies to specifically encourage all students to attend post-secondary education institutions is absent. The presence of these types of trainings and professional development opportunities will greatly improve the pedagogical abilities of general education teachers, and

increase the numbers of students attending post-secondary education institutions after high school graduation. Lastly, there is currently not enough communication and transparency about the goals for special education students and the outcomes of the existing initiatives.

As it pertains to the flexibility needed to effectively implement pedagogical methods learned at professional development and training, general education teachers must be more adaptable and willing to apply these strategies in their own practice. General education teachers must keep the needs and necessary supports for special education students in the front of their mind at all times in order to effectively plan for special education students so that they will successfully achieve desired results. The flexibility needed to accommodate and modify curriculum that supports special education students is beyond many general education teachers, and serves as a hindrance when trying to encourage special education students to pursue higher education. A general education teacher with high self-efficacy is able to more appropriately accommodate and modify curriculum in a way that may ultimately encourages special education students to attend post-secondary education institutions after high school graduation.

**Student Self-Belief.** Without a true belief in themselves and their academic capabilities, it will be truly difficult for a special education student to effectively pursue higher education after high school graduation. Students with learning disabilities tend to have much lower self-belief and self-confidence than their non-learning disabled peers. This knowledge is why it is so important for general education teachers, and the school as a whole, to strive to cultivate the competency of self-belief and self-confidence in special education students.

Importantly, the school must first work to help special education students set future goals for themselves. By working for a charter management organization that has set a college for certain goal, the hope is that the future goal of all students is to attend a post-secondary



institution after high school graduation. If a student does not want to attend college or university, then no amount of self-belief will change that desire. However, if the goal is college or university, then the student can focus their self-belief toward that goal. With the help of the school – general and special education teachers – the student will be more likely to make the goal a reality. Lastly, the practice of self-advocacy is critical in order for a special education to first set the goal of future attendance at a post-secondary education institution, and then actually meet that goal after high school graduation. High schools within the charter management organization must work to teach self-advocacy to special education students so that they are able to receive the appropriate resources and supports they deserve.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences of general education teachers as it related to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students. Findings from this study might be used to inform special education pedagogical practices, policies, and procedures at both the school and district level to improve, and to inspire future research on the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students on. The three implications supported by the key findings and conclusions from the study are to explore methods by which general education teachers might better communicate their belief in the potential of all special education students, devise systems in which more meaningful collaboration, communication, and training of general education teachers to instruct special education students can occur, and investigate strategies that general education teachers might implement to improve the self-belief and self-confidence of special education students.

**Supporting general education teachers.** The findings of this study generated implications for how the Southern California charter management organization should explore methods to support general education teachers to better communicate their belief in the potential of all special education students. Participants in this study noted that a genuine belief in the potential of special education students is an important competency when encouraging special education students to pursue higher education after high school graduation. It was also evident that participants believe general education teachers in the Southern California charter management organization do believe in the potential of special education students to attend a college or university. As such, it would be beneficial to explore methods that would help general education teachers to improve how they communicate this belief to their special education students. More knowledge of different communication techniques – written, verbal, non-verbal – might result in a greater number of special education students attending post-secondary education institutions after high school graduation.

**Supporting schools.** The findings of this study generated implications for how the Southern California charter management organization should support schools to devise systems in which more meaningful collaboration, communication, and training of general education teachers to instruct special education students can occur. Participants in this study stated that general education teachers require additional support from school and district leadership in order to more effectively educate students with learning disabilities. General education teachers, according to participants, would benefit from opportunities to collaborate more frequently with their special education colleagues. However, communication from school leadership and district headquarters lack both transparency on expectations and guidance for best practices. Resources, in the form of extensive and focused training, would serve to provide general education teachers

with a variety of pedagogical strategies that improve outcomes for special education students. It would be beneficial for the Southern California charter management organization to devise systems that allow schools to provide collaboration opportunities between general education and special education teachers, that improve how school and district leadership communication expectations and responsibilities of general education teachers, and that deliver appropriate training and professional development to general education teachers about how to effectively educate students with learning disabilities.

**Supporting special education students.** The findings of this study generated implications for how the Southern California charter management organization should investigate strategies that general education teachers might implement to support special education students to improve their self-belief and self-confidence. Participants in this study identified self-belief and self-confidence as competencies that general education teachers should cultivate in special education students, and as reasons that encourage special education students to pursue higher education. General education teachers, according to participants, have a responsibility to instill both self-belief and self-confidence in the special education students they educate on a daily basis. Furthermore, participants believe that the lack of these competencies are a great hindrance to the future attendance at post-secondary educational institutions by special education students. As such, it would be beneficial to investigate strategies that, when implemented effectively, would allow general education teachers to improve the self-belief and the self-confidence of special education students.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Findings from this study provided some insight into the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of general education teachers as it pertained to the future attendance at post-

secondary educational institutions for special education students. Recommendations for further research have been developed based on the interpretations of the key findings.

It is important to identify several ways in which this study could be improved if it were to be replicated in the future. Firstly, the disaggregation of data based on the general education teacher descriptions might provide thought-provoking information. For instance, data might be disaggregated based on the level of teacher experience, the content area taught, the teacher annual evaluation score, gender, or ethnicity. Disaggregating sample data would give researchers the access to information that might allow for more focused trainings and interventions highlighted in the implications of the study. This study did not require additional information from participants other than the criteria of a general education teacher that teaches special education students. A second way in which the study might be improved is to shrink the sample pool. This would allow the researcher to focus on solely one type of teacher for the study. For instance, the sample for the study could be only general education World History teachers. This research might be useful if future data shows that special education students are performing poorly on district wide World History benchmark exams. Study data would allow researchers to concentrate on this specific type of teacher to ascertain whether or not there are topics of concern within the specific content area. Thirdly, this study would benefit from the introduction of a quantitative data gathering tool. In addition to the one on one interviews, the study might be improved by if data is also collected using a survey or a questionnaire. This additional information would provide the researcher with more evidence with which to make conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

There are also several recommendations for future studies that might contribute to the field introduced by this study. Firstly, it would provide intriguing comparison information if

researchers conducted a similar study, but interviewed special education teachers and asked them to elaborate on the perceptions and beliefs they have on what general education teachers believe in regards to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students. The second recommendation, in parallel to the first recommendation, is to conduct a study where school administrators responsible for evaluating the general education teachers are interviewed about their perceptions and beliefs of general education teacher attitudes toward future post-secondary education institution attendance of special education students. Lastly, in another study that might offer fascinating comparison information, it is recommended that a similar investigation be conducted at a large public school district. The charter schools in this study had a population of approximately 600 students, while a large public school might have closer to 3,000 students.

### **Chapter Summary**

More resources and knowledge about how to effectively educate special education students are available now than ever before. In 2014 alone, over \$11 billion dollars in federal funds were provided to states and local school districts for special education (“Welcome to IDEAMoney Watch,” 2014). Yet, while this wealth of support and information is encouraging more special education students to attend post-secondary institutions than at any other time in history, studies have shown that as little as 10% of special education students are attending post-secondary institutions (Wagner, et al. 2005). It is imperative that schools and districts are aware of the reasons that special education students attend, or do not attend colleges and universities, and to understand how to make improvements at both the school and district levels to ultimately support and increase representation at post-secondary education institutions of students with learning disabilities. Special education students that have mild learning disabilities are required

to attend classes that are taught by general education teachers. These teachers do not hold specific special education credentials or certificates, but are tasked with the responsibility of adequately educating special education students so that they might graduate from high school and have the option to attend a post-secondary education institution upon that graduation. The opportunity, therefore, existed to conduct a research study that might provide information on the perception and beliefs of general education teachers as it pertained to the future attendance at post-secondary education institutions by special education students.

Through extensive semi-structured interviews with six high school general education teachers from a Southern California charter management organization, the researcher uncovered a variety of findings that general education teachers might use to encourage special education students to pursue higher education. Participants believed that flexibility, care, belief in students, and collaboration, communication, and training would serve as necessary characteristics to cultivate in their own practice to achieve the goal of getting special education students to attend college or university. Furthermore, self-belief, self-confidence, and self-advocacy are characteristics participants believe general education teachers should cultivate in special education students to encourage future attendance in post-secondary education. There were plenty of reasons why, or why not, special education students would attend a post-secondary institution after high school graduation, but participants had commonality with their belief that encouragement and support from the school and family, relationships with the teacher, and the future goals of the special education student were the most important mitigating factors. Importantly, participants believed, without a shadow of a doubt, that with the right resources and supports, special education students that graduate from high schools within the Southern

California charter management organization do have the capability to attend post-secondary educational institutions.

Ultimately, the researcher came to the conclusion that how much the general education teacher believes in the potential of the special education student is an absolutely critical feature for general education teachers to foster in their own teaching style. Evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Christenson & Ysseldyke, 1989; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). When teachers have high expectations for their special education students, those students are usually able to meet, and exceed, those expectations. A second conclusion that transpired from the study was that it is enormously vital for general education teachers to be provided with superlative professional development and training to best prepare them for the challenging task of effectively instructing special education students. Schools and districts, alike, are responsible for prioritizing guidance that can only serve to benefit all teachers and all students. The tolerance theory suggests that every teacher has an instructional tolerance and that special education students often fall outside of that range. However, Gerber (1988) believes that a teacher might be able to expand their instructional tolerance when they receive specific training aimed at improving their skills. The final conclusion that emerged from the study was that it is particularly essential to supply general education teachers with strategies and methods that serve to improve the self-belief and self-confidence of special education students. It is highly unlikely that any student, especially a student with learning disabilities, will attend a post-secondary education institution without the necessary self-belief and self-confidence in their academic and behavioral ability.

Implications derived from this study are that the Southern California charter management organization should explore methods to support general education teachers to better communicate their belief in the potential of all special education students, devise systems to support more meaningful collaboration, communication, and training of general education teachers to instruct special education students can occur, and investigate strategies that general education teachers might implement to support special education students to improve their self-belief and self-confidence. Recommendations for improvement of this study include disaggregating the data by participant information, shrinking the sample pool, and introducing a quantitative data gathering tool. As it pertains to future studies, recommendations have been made to interview special education teachers and school administrators in a similar fashion to how general education teachers were interviewed, and to conduct a similar study at a large public high school.

On several occasions during separate interviews, different participants made a statement that questioned the wisdom of holding students with mild learning disabilities to different expectations than their non-disabled peers. These participants believed that, even though special education students might need additional academic and behavioral support, they should be treated the same as general education students. Their thinking, it can be assumed, is that if a school, and a district's, mission is to prepare all of their students for graduation and the opportunity to attend a college or university, then it must include every single student. The males and the females. The African-Americans and the Latinos. The special education students and the general education students. Responses provided by these specific participants suggest that the mindset of educators is shifting from having hope for some students, to having hope for all students. This mindset will prove to be a fundamental requisite as schools and districts



nationwide continue to strive for academic equity and the closing of the achievement gap that exists between high and low socio-economic demographics. These are the teachers that will take us forward.

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## APPENDIX A

### Email to Potential Participant

Greetings Esteemed Teacher!

You have been carefully selected to participate in this dissertation study as a general education teacher who either has current or previous experience teaching students with learning disabilities in the general education setting.

My name is Abraham de Villiers. I am a current doctoral candidate of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology.

Possessing a long held passion for education, I am conducting a study exploring the topic of general education teacher perception of future college attendance by special education students.

As such, I invite you to participate in this avant-garde opportunity to use your voice and share your esteemed perspective!

It is a 10-question interview, and you will be provided the questions in advance for your thoughtful consideration.

Additionally, your identity will be confidential. Only your answers will be reported. More information pertaining to your rights as a participant will be provided in the Informed Consent form. For example, **participation in the study is voluntary and entails an audiotaped interview that is estimated to take 30 to 60 minutes.** You will receive a \$20 Starbucks gift card for your participation. Moreover, as a participant you will have the right to skip any question, or stop the recording or interview at any time.

**If interested, simply reply to this email, or call, to provide a window of availability and your preferred interview location.** I will send you the Interview Questions and Informed Consent form for your review prior to the interview.

Your participation in this study may prove to be extremely valuable to new and existing school districts, especially, those charged with transforming instruction of students with learning disabilities. Moreover, your participation may be informative to other scholars and practitioners in the field.

I am kindly requesting your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Abraham de Villiers  
Researcher, Pepperdine University

**APPENDIX B****Informed Consent Form****PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY****Graduate School of Education and Psychology****INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES****A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE AT POST-SECONDARY  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Abraham de Villiers, M. Ed. And Robert Barner, Ph. D. at Pepperdine University, because you have been identified as having experience as a general education teacher responsible for educating special education students in a general education classroom. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for you records.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to establish a framework that may help teachers, school leaders, and districts to better understand how the beliefs and perceptions of general education teachers might influence special education students' future attendance at post-secondary education institutions.

**STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will receive the interview questions before the interview. Once you feel you have had sufficient time to thoughtfully consider your answers, your interview will be scheduled. During the actual interview, you will be asked the previewed questions. Follow-up questions for clarification may be asked.

Please note the interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy. Confidentiality will be maintained during recording by using a pseudonym or code as identification information. However, if you do not want the interview to be audio-recorded you may still participate.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to recommend a preferred and convenient physical location with the least distraction possible, such as your classroom or other on or near campus location, or a virtual/telephone option may be available. The interview may take place during your break or after school hours. The length of the interview is estimated to

take 30 to 60 minutes of time for participation. At the conclusion of the interview you will be thanked and given a \$20 Starbucks gift card as a token of appreciation for your participation. Please note the interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy. Confidentiality will be maintained during recording by using a pseudonym or code as identification information. However, if you do not want the interview to be audio-recorded you may still participate.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to recommend a preferred and convenient physical location with the least distraction possible, such as your classroom or other on or near campus location, or a virtual/telephone option may be available. The interview may take place during your break or after school hours. The length of the interview is estimated to take 30 to 60 minutes of time for participation. At the conclusion of the interview you will be thanked and given a \$20 Starbucks gift card as a token of appreciation for your participation.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

This study is deemed as posing little risk to the participant. However, the potential and foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study include possible discomfort in expressing recorded personal opinion. A possible inconvenience of time it takes to participate in the study. A discomfort experienced by the personal risk of a potential for confidentiality breach. However, given the potential risks involved, the researcher has taken several measures to ensure confidentiality, including ensuring that minimal risk and or, discomfort is experienced by the participant.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include:

Being of supreme value to teachers, school leaders, and districts especially, those challenged with transforming how their schools educate students with learning disabilities. Moreover, your participation may be informative to other scholars and practitioners in the field, providing practical “lived experience” and insight. Perhaps of most importance, is the anticipated benefits to society when children and adolescents may receive improved preparation for their future.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will not be paid or compensated for participating in this research study. However, as an incentive for participating in this research study, you will receive a \$20 gift card to Starbucks upon completion of the interview, whether all questions are answered or not, as participant. This is a small token of gratitude, and given as a thank you, for your participation.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will keep your records confidential for this study as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me

about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in the principal investigator's place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be de-identified using a pseudonym in lieu of formal identification. The audio-recorded data will be transcribed into a software program to facilitate the researcher's analysis of the data. The pseudonym/code list responding to actual identification of participants will be stored separate from the transcribed data in a locked file cabinet in the primary researcher's home.

Only the investigators will have access to this data. Only the results of the framework will be shared at the completion of the study. If you would like the results of the completed framework, please contact me at [abdevill@pepperdine.edu](mailto:abdevill@pepperdine.edu).

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

### **ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION**

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items which you feel comfortable. Your relationship with your employer will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study.

### **INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION**

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Abraham de Villiers ([abdevill@pepperdine.edu](mailto:abdevill@pepperdine.edu)) or Robert Barner ([Robert.barner@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Robert.barner@pepperdine.edu)) if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu).

## APPENDIX C

## Notice of Approval for Human Research



Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

## NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 29, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: Abraham De Villiers

Protocol #: 16-02-198

Project Title: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE AT POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Abraham De Villiers:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants In Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson