‘Let Them Be Who They Are’: Discovering Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of Oppressive Normativity and Their Practice of Celebrating Neurodiversity

Caitlin Sweetapple
cait.sweets@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/etd

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/etd/134

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Molloy. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Molloy. For permissions, please contact the author(s) at the email addresses listed above. If there are no email addresses listed or for more information, please contact tochtera@molloy.edu.
‘Let Them Be Who They Are’: Discovering Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of Oppressive Normativity and Their Practice of Celebrating Neurodiversity

Caitlin Sweetapple

Submitted for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Molloy College

2022
The dissertation of Caitlin Sweetapple entitled: “Let Them Be Who They Are: Discovering Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of Oppressive Normativity and their Practice of Celebrating Neurodiversity” in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education and Human Services has been read and approved by the Committee:

______________________________  
Dr. Allison Roda  
Associate Professor, School of Education and Human Services  
Molloy College

______________________________  
Dr. Audrey Cohan  
Professor, School of Education and Human Services  
Molloy College

______________________________  
Dr. Warren Whitaker  
Assistant Professor, School of Education and Human Services  
Molloy College

______________________________  
Joanne O’Brien, Ed.D.  
Dean  
School of Education and Human Services  
Date: March 31, 2022
Abstract

Autistic students are faced with ableism and oppressive practices daily in their school environments. Special educators can mitigate this problem by celebrating the neurodiversity of the students in their classroom. Utilizing a critical disability theory lens, I conducted an instrumental case study through observations and interviews with six special education teachers at a special education school. The research objective was to understand how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom and adapt their practice for neurodiverse learners. The findings revealed that special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse learners do not perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom because the acceptance of neurodiversity is the standard. The findings showed that special education teachers celebrated neurodiversity and approached oppressive normativity by using sensory techniques, social support, student differentiation, and choices for learning. Yet, there is also evidence of oppressive normativity through the use of planned ignoring, prompting, and deficit-based teacher language. The findings of this study can lead to further development of the special education practice, which I call neurodiverse communication empowerment, by highlighting student voice and strengths, understanding oppressive normativity, and developing strong teacher-student relationships with autistic students. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education and critical disability theory by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity. The findings have implications for increasing training in developmental, relationship-based, strength-based, and passion-based pedagogy; receiving feedback from neurodiverse learners; and providing mainstream and inclusion teachers with opportunities to observe in strictly neurodiverse classrooms to better their practice.

Keywords: neurodiversity, autism, special education
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been completed without the dedicated individuals who supported me along my journey over the past five years. I am forever grateful for you.

For my beautiful students. Whenever I come across a challenge, you encourage me to keep going because of your resiliency in a world that is up against you. You are all perfect.

For my thoughtful and thorough dissertation committee, Dr. Allison Roda, Dr. Audrey Cohan, and Dr. Warren Whittaker. Thank you for making me a stronger learner and leader. Dr. Roda, thank you for your consistent and calming nature. Without it, I would not be here today. Every conversation made me feel at ease and taught me more about the research process. You have inspired me to never stop learning and to do so through laughter and deep breaths (and a trip or two to the beach). Dr. Cohan, your exceptional knowledge of APA style and special education enhanced my work greatly. Dr. Whittaker, your distinctive view on special education has made me a better educator and has inspired me to continue this important work long after my doctorate. Thank you all for pushing me and walking alongside me on this journey.

For my funny and dedicated Cohort Three. We started this feat together and will not end until all have defended. You became colleagues and friends for an eternity. I will never forget our continued ambition and resiliency during the tough times of COVID-19, when we could no longer attend classes in person. I am so proud of every single one of you. This is important work.

For my friends, Katie, Emily, Laura, Ali, Christina, Keri, and Tiffany. Thank you for always understanding the excuse, “Sorry, I have to write this weekend.” You all encouraged me, through laughter and wine, to keep going, even when I did not think it was possible. Thank you for entertaining me.
For my brother Andrew, who taught me from a very young age how to celebrate neurodiversity. Growing up with you has been one my most special memories. I am forever inspired by your self-determination. You make me a better professional, friend, daughter, and sister.

For Mom and Dad, who have always been my constant. Mom, thank you for always teaching me to take the road less traveled. You have provided me with the utmost guidance and love my entire life, which has provided the ground for any journey I decide to take. You have always shown me the importance of education. Because of you, I know anything is possible. Dad, you have always been my biggest fan. From sports games, to defending a dissertation, you are always there to root me on (or yell at a referee), with tears in your eyes and a smile on your face. Thank you for choosing your family. You have both dedicated your life to your kids and we are forever appreciative of you.

For Mike, my husband and best friend. During this journey, you have gone from boyfriend, roommate, fiancé, and finally husband. You met me when I was embarking on my first big dream. You never held me back, always took on my dreams as yours, and held me up when that dream felt heavy. When that dream was met and I positioned my next big thing, a doctorate, you laughed with me and said, “Let’s do it.” Thank you for understanding that I will never stop dreaming, and always holding my hand through this crazy life. The sacrifices you have made, (and countless dinners, laundry loads, delivered glasses of wine) will never go unnoticed. You are my best friend for life and I can’t wait to engage in our next dream together. I love you, always.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the neurodivergent students who have touched my life.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................ 4
Dedication ......................................................................................................................................... 6
Chapter One ...................................................................................................................................... 8
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 8
Literature Review ............................................................................................................................ 21
Methodology ..................................................................................................................................... 39
Results ................................................................................................................................................ 52
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 104
References ......................................................................................................................................... 125
Institutional Review Board Approval Letter .................................................................................... 134
SAMPLING QUESTIONNAIRE ....................................................................................................... 136
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL ......................................................................................................... 140
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ............................................................................................................... 142
Chapter One

Introduction

Prompt: If you could communicate one affirmation to your learners, what would you say?

Jennifer: Your brain is amazing and worthy.

I walk into the school building and hear the click of my badge signifying another day of unpredictability, laughter, challenges, and successes. I yawn as I am still exhausted from the day before; yet I smile thinking of the possibilities of a new school day. Before I even make it to my desk, I am alerted that Johnny¹ was up all night, Derek and Lisa got into an argument on the bus over the latest SpongeBob episode, and Cruz is having a difficult time self-regulating this morning. To some, this would be a nightmare of a morning, but as the director of special education, my role is filled with the joys of finding new strengths and skills within my students on the spectrum. In the literature, this practice of valuing the differences among students is called neurodiversity (Singer, 1999). The quote above by Jennifer, one of the participants of this study, exemplified her appreciation of neurodiversity when she reflected on the learners in her classroom, “Your brain is amazing and worthy.”

However, not all special education teachers think or act like Jennifer. This is the case because special education in America has created a system based on student’s deficits. (Armstrong, 2012). This system is called ableism, which is defined as a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or another (Smith, 2020). The focus, however, should be on celebrating the differences within classrooms and highlighting the strengths of even the most neurodiverse students, rather than attempting to

¹ All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
normalize them (Silberman, 2015). This dissertation uses the term *oppressive normativity* to describe the discrimination of students on the autism spectrum based on their characteristics deviating from what is considered typical or deviating from the norm (Shotwell, 2012).

Although the focus on celebrating student differences should be common practice in special education, the outcome in American schools often results in students with special needs not having the right to maximize their potential or contribute to society (Vishwanath, 2019). For example, Owren and Stenhammer (2013) questioned why society is so preoccupied with getting autistic people to make eye contact despite their difficulty with this societal norm. This oppressive normativity should not occur in an autistic student’s classroom experiences, and I aimed to discover other examples of this notion throughout the research process.

After nearly a decade working in the field of special education, I still long for the day when special educators do not view students through an ableist lens. I witness student’s hand flapping to account for the overwhelming sensory stimuli in the room, or hear the scripting of a favorite television show, and I cannot imagine a world without autism in it. I do not want to change or assimilate my students; however, I am not naïve to think that all educators feel the same. Unfortunately, one of the places where this assimilation occurs most often is in school.

Nevertheless, it is possible for a special education teacher to be a positive role model who understands strength-based models of learning and takes the time to get to know the needs, interests, and passions of students they interact with on a daily basis. This celebration of neurodiversity can start an affirmative trend in an autistic student’s educational career (Armstrong, 2012) and create a positive learning environment for students to flourish. To begin impacting change for autistic students, it is essential for professionals in the special education field to understand how special education teachers perceive and approach oppressive normativity.
in their classrooms. Hehir (2002) argued that “ableist assumptions and practices are deeply embedded in schooling” (p. 22). More recently, Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) discussed the importance of disrupting dominant discourses about autism and argued for a repositioning of the commonly used oppressive lens. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine how special education teachers perceive and approach oppressive normativity in their classroom. By understanding the perceptions of special education teachers, educational stakeholders and policy makers can begin to break down potential barriers in pedagogical practices, change policy and curriculum, and support a neurodiverse classroom.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was framed using the lens of critical disability theory, which challenges society’s assumptions about disability and states that it is a social construct (Hosking, 2008). The normative perceptions of humans perpetuate the ableism that exists in our society, and students on the spectrum experience that daily in their classroom. This theory can be used to explain how disability itself does not necessarily “disable” someone, but rather how the environment around them does. I argue that American special education as a system is restricting autistic students by forcing normalcy, rather than creating an environment where these students can thrive and truly be their authentic selves. Critical disability studies consider how institutions and/or societies “dis-able” people systemically and socially (Chapman, 2019). For example, if an individual using a wheelchair for mobility would like to enter a bank with no wheelchair ramp, the bank, rather than the disability, is hindering the individual. The examples of societal barriers for individuals with disabilities are endless.
Terminology

Typically, when writing and speaking about disability, person-first language is used. This is to signify that the individual is a person first, disability second. Autistic self-advocates do not agree with this notion because they are not ashamed of their autistic characteristics. When describing autism, disability-first language is more generally accepted (O’Reilly et al., 2020). Throughout this dissertation, the terms autistic student (disability-first language) and neurodiverse student (diversity-focused language) are used (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). The term autism spectrum disorder is not used, but rather, autism or on the spectrum is incorporated into this dissertation. Purposefully, disorder is not used, so to highlight the notion that autism as a (dis)ability should not be defined by its deficits but rather by its large spectrum of qualities.

Statement of the Problem

Autism is typically viewed from a deficit mindset rather than from a place in which neurodiverse strengths are maximized (Armstrong, 2017b). A predominance of the current research is focused on how students on the spectrum deviate from what is considered “normal” (Myers, 2019). Research on autism also concentrates on “its causality and medical or therapeutic treatments” (Myers, 2019, p. 3), leading to a focus on how autistic individuals can be “cured” rather than how society can alter their idealistic expectations (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). Autism cannot be cured; therefore, it needs to be further understood and celebrated. This celebration should begin in school where most students on the spectrum spend their time.

The problem in the field is that many special education teachers perpetuate oppressive normativity by following and implementing principles such as applied behavior analysis, which claims that it is evidence based despite the presence of some complications.” (ABA; Shyman, 2016). ABA is the ability to replace or reduce so-called inappropriate, non-contextual, or
dysfunctional behaviors with those deemed by society as more appropriate, contextual, or functional (Shyman, 2016). By expecting autistic students to change their behavior to perform and comply, the educator’s reasoning is often for “social validation” (Milton, 2018). In my experience, I have worked with many special education teachers whose focus is compliance and normative behavior. I contend that these strict behavioral techniques are further assimilating our autistic students in the classroom.

Rather than assimilating autistic students by practicing ABA, special education teachers should be “celebrating their uniqueness in the way they relate, communicate and process the world around them” (Breslow, 2020, p. 1). My argument is not to say that all special education teachers oppress students on the spectrum but rather to discuss how the phenomenon of oppressive normativity is approached. Indeed, I found many positive perceptions in the fight against oppressive normativity throughout this research study, most specifically a pedagogical practice I termed neurodiverse communication empowerment, which highlights how teachers use their students’ diverse communication styles to create an educational partnership between them. Though there was evidence of both oppressive normativity and neurodiversity celebration in my study, there is still much unknown in autism research related to this notion of oppressive normativity, particularly on how it plays out in schools and classrooms.

Indeed, what is still unknown, and the focus of this study, is how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classrooms. It is imperative that special education teachers discover students’ differences and strengths and implement differentiated strength-based strategies, to provide the most appropriate educational practices (Armstrong, 2012). Strength-based learning is when a teacher engages a student in the learning process by utilizing a student’s strengths at the forefront of the curriculum (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Special
education teachers need to think about their students as assets rather than liabilities (Armstrong, 2012). Studying the perceptions of special education teachers on oppressive normativity and the techniques they use to eliminate it in the classroom could be useful in shifting the narrative from normativity to neurodiversity.

**Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the connections between special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom. While much is known about ableism in schools, the significance of this study was to understand how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom and adapt their teaching for neurodiverse learners. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education and critical disability theory by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity. Understanding special education teachers’ practices of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom can help to shift schools and society away from normativity and toward accepting and appreciating differences in neurodiverse students.

**Research Questions**

Utilizing critical disability theory, my study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom?

2. How do special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom?

What techniques do special education teachers use to celebrate neurodiverse students in their classroom? (See Key Terms)
Research Methods and Design

To understand the perceptions of special education teachers, I conducted an instrumental case study through observations and interviews of six participants, which provided an in-depth view into their classroom experiences and behaviors. Case study designs assist researchers in understanding a certain aspect of educational practice (Merriam, 1985). I chose an instrumental design to further understand oppressive normativity and the celebration of neurodiversity of special education teachers that may represent similar cases (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). The interviews and observations were semi-structured to allow the participants to freely share their perceptions on this critical topic. I co-constructed reality with the participants by understanding their individual experiences and my interpretations of their perceptions to form the common themes of this study.

Setting and Participants

Participants in this study included six special education teachers at Shaker Hills School (pseudonym) who have experience working with neurodiverse learners. Shaker Hills is located in a suburban area in the Northeast and serves students with disabilities in elementary, middle, and high school. Students at Shaker Hills come from various local school districts to receive access to programs that are specialized for students on the autism spectrum. A school district places a student there when an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team decides that the public school is unable to meet the needs of the student. Shaker Hills is more restrictive, meaning the level of support in the classroom is higher than what students typically received in their public school. Often, students are placed at Shaker Hills because they were not successful in their public-school district and require a more specialized educational setting.
Classes at Shaker Hills range from 6 to 12 students in a class with one special education teacher and 1 to 4 paraprofessionals. The home school district selects the most appropriate staffing ratio consistent with the student’s IEP. Most students at Shaker Hills are placed in an 8:1:1 classroom, meaning eight students, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional. Related services at Shaker Hills include occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physical therapy, hearing impaired support, visual impaired support, counseling, and remedial reading. This setting was ideal and purposeful for my study as students come from racially and economically diverse backgrounds and special education teachers work specifically with neurodiverse populations of students.

I utilized a critical purposeful sampling technique to provide a rich example of perceptions of oppressive normativity and neurodiversity as experienced by special education teachers (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Special education teachers at Shaker Hills were given a sampling questionnaire to identify who may be a good fit for the study based on their perceptions and experiences of neurodiversity. The sections on the questionnaire requested information on demographics, years of teaching experience, types of experience, population of students they work with, teaching methodologies they use in the classroom, and willingness to participate in the study.

After purposefully choosing participants who seemed to have positive perceptions and practices that reflect an appreciation of neurodiversity, I scheduled dates and times for observations and interviews during Spring 2021. Interviews and observations were conducted on Zoom because of COVID-19 precautions. All six special education teachers interviewed were observed teaching three live classes on Zoom prior to the interview. The teachers were observed in their natural setting, teaching a class of neurodiverse students. I took field notes recorded in a
semi-structured fashion. The field note protocol for observations included: (a) classroom setting and tone, (b) body language and attitudes of teachers, (c) celebration of neurodiverse learners, and (d) oppressive/forced normative assimilation.

After making careful observation of special education teachers, I interviewed them via Zoom. The interviews were conducted from March to July 2021, and included semi-structured and open-ended questions with the intention of eliciting views and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were asked questions about the learning environment and teaching philosophy, oppressive normativity, and the classroom observation. I actively listened to the participants’ perceptions, only interjecting to summarize, paraphrase, or ask for further explanation (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Fieldnotes and interview transcriptions were transcribed verbatim and scanned to begin making connections with the data. The data were coded in Dedoose, an online data analysis software program, and interpreted to make meaning behind the participants’ words.

**Ethical Issues**

With respect to confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the district studied, as well as the participants. As a special educator, I needed to continuously check my bias during the research process. This was done through member checking, fieldnotes, and memos. Although I do not have any ties to the teachers or the district, I came into this research project with preconceived notions on the topic due to my own positionality with the topic. While collecting and analyzing my data, I found it imperative to be reflexive with what I found. To keep the research process ethical, I reported multiple perspectives as well as contrary findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One finding was unexpected, but I represented the evidence with honesty to produce an ethical research study.
Trustworthiness

To ensure validity, I completed member checking by providing each participant with the final data analysis report to check if it was an accurate representation of the participant’s perceptions. Participants then received the semi-final product to read through and reflect upon. Participant feedback was considered for the final data-analysis section. I also provided a detailed description of the setting and offered many perspectives about the themes to add to the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As mentioned previously, my own reflexivity was paramount in creating an open and honest narrative of the participant’s perceptions.

To ensure reliability, I designed a detailed case study protocol (see Appendices). There was a separate observation and interview protocol that I followed closely for each participant. Lastly, I checked the participant transcripts multiple times for potential mistakes made during the transcription process.

Definition of Key Terms

Ableism: A set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other (Smith, 2020). Ableism is intertwined in our culture, due to many limiting beliefs about what disability does or does not mean, how able-bodied people learn to treat people with disabilities, and they are not included at the table for key decisions (Smith, 2020).

Ableist Perspective: The devaluation of disability results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids, etc. (Hehir, 2002).
**Applied Behavioral Analysis:** Ability to replace or reduce inappropriate, non-contextual, or dysfunctional behaviors with those that are more appropriate, contextual, or functional (Shyman, 2016).

**Autism Spectrum Disorder:** A developmental disability that can cause significant social, communicative, and behavioral challenges (CDC, 2020). Notice the deficit language.

**Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based (DIR®/Floortime™) Model (DIR):** A framework that assists educators in conducting a comprehensive assessment and develop an intervention program tailored to the unique challenges and strengths of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other developmental challenges (Greenspan & Wieder, 2008).

**Disability Oppression:** A term used to describe the all-encompassing system of discrimination and exclusion of people living with disabilities (Casteñeda et al., 2013).

**Neurodiversity:** Effort to acknowledge the richness and complexity of human nature and of the human brain (Armstrong, 2012).

**Normal:** The state of being usual, typical, or expected (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020).

**Oppressive Normativity:** A term describing the discrimination of students on the autism spectrum based on their characteristics deviating from what is considered atypical or deviating from the norm.

**Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI):** “The SDLMI is intended to be used by general and special education teachers and school professionals across a variety of academic (e.g., English, Math) and non-academic (e.g., social, behavioral, transition planning) areas to enable students to become more effective at initiating and self-regulating their actions as they work toward self-selected goals” (Shogren et al., 2019).

Special Education:

(1) Special education means specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including—

(i) Instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and

(ii) Instruction in physical education.

(2) Special education includes each of the following, if the services otherwise meet the requirements of paragraph (a)(1) of this section—

(i) Speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under State standards;

(ii) Travel training; and

(iii) Vocational education.

(IDEA Sec. 300.39, 2004).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A technique and educational framework that adapts teaching and learning to individual learners’ needs based on scientific inquiry into how humans learn (CAST, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research topic of my dissertation. Through this critical, instrumental case study on special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and
neurodiversity in the classroom, I discovered common themes from participants that will add to the growing body of research in autism education. The next chapter provides a review of the literature and theoretical framework and describes how my study fits into the current research on this topic.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Chapter One introduced my dissertation topic on how special educators perceive neurodiversity in special education and approach oppressive normativity. This chapter reviews the literature with a focus on ableism in society and special education specifically, as well as critical disability theory. Also, I critically review studies conducted by prominent researchers in the field and portray how my study fills a significant gap in the research. This theoretical and empirical discussion leads to Chapter Three, where I outline my research paradigm and the research design that guide my study.

Despite the increase in diagnosis and awareness of autism, there is still controversy and divisiveness among how special education professionals educate autistic students in schools (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2019). In the field of special education, queries between the most appropriate approach, theory, and practice for autistic students remains (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2019). Autism research has made a shift from the medicalized approach to a social approach; however, there are still special education teachers who participate in pathologizing and labeling students on the spectrum (Douglas et al., 2021). The controversy among autism education is rooted in an extensive history of research and ableism in schools.

Models of disability provide a viewpoint to further our understanding of disability and how impairments intersect with greater society. The medical model of disability postulates a viewpoint that sees an individual’s disability as a limitation that should be cured and results in social exclusion (Bunbury, 2019). Conversely, the social model of disability provides a scrutiny that society disables the individual through oppressive attitudes and biases (Bunbury, 2019). Autism is a disability that does not have a “cure”; therefore, it is imperative for society to
understand autistic characteristics and challenges to create a more accepting and aware environment for neurodiverse individuals.

The following review of the literature focuses on the following themes: (a) controversial history of autism, (b) ableism, (c) critical disability theory, (d) shift to neurodiversity, (e) manifestation of oppressive normativity in the classroom, and (f) gaps in the literature. These themes allow me as the researcher to understand the background related to my topic, in order to proceed into the methodology of my study. I begin with the controversial history of autism.

**Controversial History of Autism**

Autism was first introduced by an Austrian psychiatrist named Leo Kanner in 1935 (O’Reilly et al., 2020). At this time, autism was often confused with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses due to its characteristics such as the need for sameness, desire for aloneness, and intrusive obsessions (O’Reilly et al., 2020). These characteristics, much like most human differences, were negatively labeled. Autism was extremely medicalized, as evidenced by a societal focus on institutionalizing individuals and enduring inhumane treatment (Casteñeda et al., 2013). Individuals with disabilities in general were viewed as less than human (Casteñeda et al., 2013), strictly because they were different from society’s ideals of what it meant to be normal.

Around the same period that Kanner began his work on autism, Hans Asperger began writing about his observations of children exhibiting similar characteristics such as “challenges forming friendships, displayed a general lack of empathy toward others, had clumsy movements, and had difficulties with communication” (O’Reilly et al., 2020, p. 139). Asperger distinguished that autistic characteristics were on a continuum and stated not even autistic individuals presented similar characteristics (now known as the spectrum). Children with the disorder had
characteristics of a genius and could flourish (Silberman, 2015). It is imperative to note the positive lens in Asperberger’s writing about autism, as this viewpoint is more aligned with the neurodiversity perspective of my dissertation study.

Kanner and Asperger may have both used the term autistic; however, their viewpoint on the appreciation of neurodiversity differed widely. Kanner believed in medical observation and diagnosis, whereas Asperger used therapy that did not involve standardized tests but rather relationships between him as a doctor and the child as his patient (Ripamonti, 2016). This relationship that Asperger strove to have with his patients is similar to the current recommendation from The Interdisciplinary Council on Development and Learning (ICDL, 2020), which states that positive relationships can support the development of individuals on the autism spectrum. According to Koenig (2020), building relationships with a student can be done by incorporating strengths and interests into curriculum versus pathologizing their interests. As Ripamonti (2016) wrote:

Hans Asperger used to call the children in his clinic “little professors” to highlight their innate abilities in a specific field, but also to emphasize his belief they had something to say and they could eventually offer a valuable contribution to society, if appropriately supported. (p. 59)

Although, the term neurodiversity was not introduced until the late 1990s, Asperger understood the importance of strength-based learning for autistic children prior to this period. Unfortunately, his observation did not resonate greatly for other scholars in the field and only shifted as autism became further researched. Despite Asperger’s efforts, autism continued to be medicalized with a focus on the “cure,” much like how society views a disease (Silberman, 2015). Autism was considered to be that of a cancer, one you must eradicate to get back to a feeling of ordinary. I
contend that this pathology of autism is still the central motivation in research on special education and drives my motivation of this research study.

In the 1950s, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) was developed and influenced society on how normal was viewed (O’Reilly et al., 2020). Essentially, any human difference added into this manual labeled someone as deviant from societal norms, or as having a diagnosed disorder. Autism was added to the manual in 1980, with the creation of the DSM-III, after Lorna Wing and Judith Gould (1979) coined the term *autism spectrum disorder*, concurrent with the notion Hans Asperger declared earlier.

The term *spectrum* is used to signify the varying levels of functioning an autistic individual can possess. In Wing and Gould’s early research (1979), autistic individuals were considered “socially impaired,” drastically altering the picture painted by Hans Asperger nearly 40 years prior. Autism remains in the DSM, now in its fifth edition, and continues to focus on its deviation from a *normal person*. What constitutes a normative person is still highly debatable; however, we do know that the lived experiences of autistic students are imperative to the future of autism research because they shed light on areas of need to ensure a positive educational experience (Leveto, 2018).

In the 21st century, there is increased awareness of autism that is directly correlated to the increased number of individuals diagnosed, representation of autistic individuals by the media, and self-advocates. There have also been changes in the way autism has been recognized, understood, and described, causing widespread disagreement and controversy among researchers and practitioners in the field (Ripamonti, 2016). Yet, limited research exists on what matters to autistic individuals and their families. Professionals in the field of special education may need to alter practice by concentrating on the matters that impact autistic lives, such as the celebration of
neurodiversity (Pellicano & Stears, 2020). Additionally, O’Reilly et al. (2020) noted there is a need for qualitative research that respects autistic voices and understands their experiences. In this dissertation, I added to the literature by understanding how special education teachers listen to the student voices within their classroom by practicing a term I coined *neurodiverse communication empowerment*.

To shift this focus in autism research to a neurodiversity paradigm, educators must first be transparent about the presence of ableism in our society. Schools and classrooms, specifically special education classrooms, are unfortunately placing autistic students on the sidelines with hidden ableism (Timberlake, 2020). This hidden ableism manifests in pedagogy, curriculum, and interactions with students. Critical disability theory, the lens of this dissertation, helps to validate that classrooms socially construct disability as a deficit or limitation, rather than a quality to be further understood, accepted, and appreciated. This ableist lens creates expectations based on society’s standard of normal, assimilating students on the spectrum in and out of their classrooms. In the next section of this literature review, I further explain how ableism perpetuates oppressive normativity of autistic students.

**Ableism**

As defined in Chapter One, ableism is a form of disability oppression that is used to describe the discrimination and exclusion of individuals with disabilities (Casteñeda et al., 2013). Ableism can be defined as a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or another (Smith, 2020). For many educators, it is preferable for disabled students to absorb neurotypical behaviors, as doing so requires less differentiation and classroom management (Hehir, 2002). An important factor of
special education is differentiation based on neurodiversity in the classroom; however, special education teachers often force compliance rather than differentiating lessons (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). This practice can traumatize children during their school-aged years by forcing them to comply with society’s idea of what is expected behavior (Kupferstein, 2018). To change the “global perspective” of forced normalcy as Kupferstein noted, it is more beneficial for students on the spectrum to have their special education teachers understand their behaviors and the meaning behind them.

There are countless narratives of individuals with disabilities who have stated that the focus of their young lives was to change their disability by altering their behavior to have the same opportunities as their classmates (Hehir, 2002). This medicalized approach is rejected by critical disability studies and is more aligned with the medical model of disability. Shyman (2016) argued that disability is a social phenomenon that negatively interacts with a student’s educational environment. There is a common narrative that autism is treated as a disease so individuals can attain normality (Shyman, 2016). In fact, professionals are trained to identify “deficits and maladaptive functioning” (Koenig, 2020, p. 20), rather than understanding a student’s strengths and differences.

I argue that educators who follow ideals of ableism are setting autistic students up for failure. Rather than searching for a cure, educators should recognize and honor neurodiverse abilities and create environments where strengths can be maximized and weaknesses are minimized (Armstrong, 2017a). As Hehir (2002) suggested:

The pervasiveness of ableist assumptions in the education of these children not only reinforces prevailing prejudices against disability but may very well contribute to low levels of educational attainments and employment. School time spent devoted to
activities associated with changing disability may take away from the time needed to
learn academic material. (p. 5)

I argue that this shift in thinking and working with students on the spectrum should begin from
the start of a student’s educational career. No students should spend their days in school feeling
as if their teacher wants to change them. Rather, the focus should be providing “positive niches,”
respectfully working on areas of challenge, and allowing students to grow in their own
individualized way (Armstrong, 2017a). Although this focus is known by professionals, what is
not understood is how special education teachers specifically approach oppressive normativity in
their classroom and celebrate the neurodiversity of their students.

Special education should not mean a different curriculum but rather how students access
the same curriculum as their neurotypical peers by addressing their unique needs (Hehir, 2002).
The dominant discourses about autism must be disrupted to impact change about the nature of
autism (Botema-Beutel et al., 2021). These disruptions in negative discourse can and should
begin with special education teachers. Currently, the neurodiversity movement intellectualizes
autism where it is admired, while still recognizing challenges and supporting exceptional needs
(Botema-Beutel et al., 2021). Similarly, Timberlake (2020) argued that “recognizing ableism
means re-defining normal and committing to the belief that student variability is not a surprise,
but is the norm” (p. 95). Koenig (2020) similarly claimed that “there are neurotypical biases that
make it difficult for professionals to make this shift” from deficit-based learning to strength-
based learning (p. 20). This notion tells us that normative thinking and perceptions occur within
the field of special education.

As a field, special education teachers must re-learn how they interact with students with
disabilities. In special education, there is too much emphasis on labeling, segregating, and
remediating students to fit an unrealistic standard (Timberlake, 2020). We must challenge the
dialogue of special education teachers having “patience” or being a “special person” because this
discourse assumes disability to be burdensome (Timberlake, 2020). Working with students with
disabilities does not mean denying a student’s challenges but rather allowing them to be human in their schooling and giving them the tools to overcome these challenges (Timberlake, 2020).
Special education teachers must begin to reject ableist ideals and stop focusing on the
normalization of their students. Critical disability theory helps us to challenge these assumptions.
The next section gives an overview of the theoretical framework of this study.

**Critical Disability Theory**

Critical disability theory challenges society’s negative assumptions about disability and states that disability is a social construct (Hosking, 2008). This implies that humanity further disables students with disabilities by providing environments that are not welcoming to a student’s differences, which are characteristically qualities of their disability. Critical disability theory provides special education teachers an opportunity to understand how their student’s disability interacts with the classroom environment they design. It begs the question of whether their classroom environment is conducive or detrimental to neurodiverse learners. Critical disability theory combats ableism in society, not by being empathetic toward those with disabilities but by dismantling policies, structures, and processes that promote normative thinking and behavior.

Disability studies made a shift in the last century from the medical and social model of disability to a critical theory (Goodley et al., 2019). Critical disability theory adds to the social model of disability, which states that the environment is disabling to an individual rather than the impairment itself. Critical disability theory allows me as a researcher to see how the special
education teachers’ perceptions and actions either assimilate autistic students into social society or celebrate and understand their differences. Also, curriculum is often developed without input from individuals with disabilities, so it does not take their voice and ideals into consideration (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Individuals with disabilities should have a say in their curriculum and be active members in their educational decisions (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017), a finding that I discuss in further detail in Chapter Four and Chapter Five of this dissertation.

One of the arguments and limitations of critical disability theory is that it discounts how impairments affect an individual who is disabled (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). Therefore, critical disability theory will prevent me, a neurotypical researcher, from seeing how individuals with disabilities such as those on the spectrum, struggle in the classroom. Students on the spectrum may want their behaviors to change to feel more comfortable in their educational environments. However, Stenning (2020) questioned whether students’ or educators’ perceptions of autism are most relevant—those who accentuate impairments or those who accentuate strengths. Some might argue that the impairment is important because it may negatively impact individuals in a way that they themselves want to change. Special education teachers can only understand this phenomenon further by having discussions with their neurodiverse learners about how they interpret their educational environment.

As a neurotypical researcher and special educator, I am not aware of the struggles that autistic characteristics may pose. It is imperative to note that some individuals may want to change their characteristics to have a better quality of life. Despite this limitation, critical disability theory is still the most appropriate theory for my research goals because it highlights the importance of promoting neurodiverse ways of thinking in education. Research has shown that special education teachers should not be assimilating students because of their impairment
(Armstrong, 2012), and critical disability theory allows me to view my study through that lens by fighting for disability justice for neurodiverse learners.

Other researchers have used this theory in similar ways. For example, Peña et al. (2016) examined the social structure of language, labels, and knowledge associated with disabilities and reasoned in favor of critical and intersectional perspectives on disability identity. Similarly, and in relation to autistic individuals, O’Dell et al. (2016) stated,

…a critical abilities framework not only respects the complex personhood of autistic individuals but also reveals how the construction of autistic identities holds important insights for how to rethink, and extend, ideas associated with cognitive ‘normalcy’ (or ‘ability’) and difference. (p. 7)

Critical disability theory is used to explore, analyze, and dismantle the normative, binary conception of disability that has perpetuated societal oppressive environmental barriers that disabled people face in their daily life. The goal of this framework is to provide knowledge in the continued activism in the fight for disability justice in our society.

It is often argued that the difficulties that autistic individuals face are less about their characteristics of autism and more about how those characteristics intersect with humanity and their environment (Stenning, 2020). This is not to say that some characteristics of autism are not challenging for the individual and their family, but rather to acknowledge those struggles and provide a platform of understanding and acceptance around them. In other words, these two conceptions can co-exist. In a recent study on autism acceptance and biases, researchers found that providing neurotypical individuals with autism acceptance training had an impact on explicit bias but not implicit bias (Jones et al., 2021). There needs to be more movement toward autistic acceptance by understanding autistic differences and neurodiversity (Dever, 2021). This
acceptance can and should begin in schools, by modifying and accommodating for neurodiverse learners to ensure their educational environment is supportive of their individuality (Griffiths, 2020). The next section expands on autism acceptance, discusses the neurodiversity movement surrounding autism, and explores how society and self-advocates have started a shift in thinking that can be adopted by special education teachers working with neurodiverse students.

**Shift to Neurodiversity**

Every April, our nation celebrates “Autism Awareness Month;” however, holistically as a society, we still do not appreciate or understand autistic individuals. Society wears blue to signify the large majority of male influence in autism and humanity supposes that their blue shirts and puzzle pieces will make all the difference in the life of a student on the spectrum. However, it has been argued that what truly makes a difference is a perspective of neurodiversity (Hughes, 2016). The neurodiversity movement is aimed at altering society to be supportive of neurodiverse individuals while also “acknowledging both challenges and strengths that come with neurodivergence” (Hughes, 2016, p. 5).

Being autistic is still considered a minority position in a society where a majority of people are neurotypical, where our aim as special education teachers should be to create an educational environment that is accessible to everyone, especially those on the spectrum (Owren & Stenhammer, 2013). The factors that are responsible for the exclusion of neurodiverse individuals is “lack of awareness, inaccessibility, privilege and stigma” (Hughes, 2016, p. 5). By shifting from a medicalized mindset to the neurodiversity movement, educators can celebrate the uniqueness in how an autistic student relates, communicates, and processes the world around him or her (Breslow, 2020). I propose that we not only celebrate awareness of autism every April but also celebrate the acceptance and appreciation of neurodivergence in our society.
Leveto (2018) argued that autistic individuals could feel appreciated in society by educating the greater population about the characteristics of being on the spectrum. By making the shift to a neurodiversity perspective, we call for acceptance of neurological variation among people (Leveto, 2018). For example, Armstrong (2012) stated, “The neurodiversity paradigm suggests that we take the positive attitudes and beliefs that most people hold about biodiversity and cultural diversity and apply them to differences among human brains” (p. 12).

Autism is ever evolving; therefore, society needs to evolve as well. The size of the autistic community is also growing due to increased diagnosis. An analysis completed by Zolyomi and Tennis (2017) identified the need to respect autistic individuals’ identity to disentangle the complexities surrounding the autism phenomenon. For autistic activists, the agenda of normalization is a lived experience in an ableist society (Milton, 2018). This lived experience often begins in schools across America (Vishwanath, 2019), which is why it is imperative for special education teachers to change this narrative.

In a recent study by Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017), autistic individuals were questioned about the stigma and conceptions of autism. They found that:

Autistic participants’ conceptions of autism often aligned with those of the neurodiversity movement, in that they most frequently described autism as positive or neutral biological differences, and least frequently endorsed the medical model, e.g., by exhibiting the least interest in normalization or in finding a cure for autism. (p. 17)

Although we know that autistic individuals often feel as though their autistic characteristics should not be normalized, we do not know if their special education teachers feel similarly or what they do to combat oppression in the classroom.
Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989 when she wrote about the intersection of race and gender in the discrimination against Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Although many researchers do not explicitly address this notion, neurodiversity and intersectionality are closely aligned (Strand, 2017). Fighting for appreciation of neurodiversity becomes more difficult when you add the intersection of culture or race (Lang, 2019). In fact, disability is understudied in intersectionality research (Strand, 2017), and intersectionality is almost nonexistent in special education research. Although autism is more prevalent among White children, more specifically White males, research suggests that in New York State, teachers’ perceptions of Black, Latinx, and Asian students on the spectrum lack an intersectional view (Lang, 2019) because most special educators in New York State are White (New York State Education Department Diversity Report, 2019).

It is unclear whether this disparity is due to racial biases in diagnosis (Lang, 2019); however, as a White female researcher, I acknowledge that intersectionality has an impact on the perceptions of special education teachers on oppressive normativity. I also acknowledge that the racial diversity of special education teachers can influence their perceptions due to implicit bias. For example, the participants in my study were all White and none of them discussed race or the impact of race and disability in our conversations. This was a clear shortcoming of my study, and future research in this area is imperative to further understand the intersection between race and disability. Hughes (2016) argued that we must acknowledge and include intersectional perspectives when speaking about neurodiversity and how other oppressed groups can experience disability differently. Understanding disability—more specifically, neurodiversity—can transform intersectionality research (Strand, 2017).
Manifestation of Oppressive Normativity in the Classroom

The concept of organizing students according to their label is so natural in a special education setting that you cannot place blame on teachers but rather on the larger school system (Wexler, 2016). Too often, the approaches to intervention for students on the spectrum are “framed by neurotypical definitions of being social,” creating a subjective approach (Koenig, 2020, p. 20). Students on the spectrum are taught in school to camouflage their characteristics of autism to assimilate with their neurotypical peers (Jorgenson et al., 2020). It is unclear whether this process initiated by special education administration and teachers is implicit or explicit. Wexler stated that “…the trajectory of special education from omission to inclusion involves the pervasive deficit model” (p. 33).

American schools often make a binary “typical versus atypical distinction” when categorizing students, which promotes different and oppressive educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Vishwanath, 2019, p. 612). As Lalvani and Bacon (2019) wrote:

The fact that children notice differences, or that they classify, based on it is not, in itself, a problem. Rather, the problem is that, through the responses they receive from adults around them, or through the lack of conversation about their observations, children can learn that some kinds of differences are less desirable, and certain groups less valued. (p. 89)

Special education in America is driven by evidence-based principles; however, the evidence is based on normalizing students to be like neurotypical students, rather than what is appropriate for autistic students to feel appreciated. One of these principles is that of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). This autism “treatment” is defined as the ability to replace or reduce inappropriate, non-contextual, or dysfunctional behaviors with those that are more appropriate,
contextual, or functional (Shyman, 2016). These behaviors are often subjective and decided by the teacher or therapist working with a student (Milton, 2018), rather than the individuals themselves. Professionals who use this therapy generally only use student interests as rewards (Koenig, 2020), rather than the driving force in curriculum and instruction.

Though widely used by professionals who work in special education, ABA has been found to have major issues in theory and practice (Milton, 2018). Additionally, students on the spectrum have identified factors of ABA to be detrimental to their well-being (Kupferstein, 2018). ABA is a form of oppressive normativity because it includes a focus on compliance, normative assumptions, and a reduction in opportunity for natural curiosity and exploration of the world around the student (Milton, 2018). This natural exploration assists a student on the spectrum to relate and communicate with their environment, setting a student up for a successful educational career (ICDL, 2020). Armstrong stated (2012), “Many students in special education, however, feel futility in their future. Thus, it becomes important to help them construct positive self-images and expectations that they will function as successful adults when they leave school” (p. 15). The question remains: How do special education teachers approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity?

There is evidence that students who were exposed to principles of ABA have experienced severe levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (Kupferstein, 2018). Rather than shaping behavior, supports for autistic individuals should include assistance in navigating unfamiliar environments, appreciating quirks, and providing opportunities to engage with neurodiverse peers (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). This evidence points to the need for change in how special educators and practitioners working with students on the spectrum view their autistic qualities and how they use them to provide positive learning environments (Armstrong, 2012).
Teacher Training

The aim of this dissertation was to further understand further the training that special education teachers receive on techniques to celebrate neurodiversity and approach oppressive normativity in the classroom. This next section highlights techniques that special education teachers can use and discuss areas where training is needed. In a recent study completed by Griffiths (2020), special education teachers received training on a neurodiversity approach to pedagogy. The training focused on a toolkit with strategies for “fostering self-esteem, understanding challenging behavior as a form of communication and teaching metacognition” (p. 2). When teachers began to look beyond a student’s labels, they reported improvements in engagement, confidence, self-esteem, and academic progress (Griffiths, 2020). This study outlined that special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners need training to increase confidence when teaching for neurodiversity: “The chosen focus of intervention, whether it is through a strength-based lens or a deficit focus will be critical for long-term outcomes including quality of life, well-being and the ability to live a self-determined life” (Koenig, 2020, p. 20).

Special education professionals and writers such as Thomas Armstrong, Steven Silberman, and Barry Prizant are focused on changing the narrative around autism. It is imperative that when special education teachers learn of a student’s strengths that they design lessons and strategies that are differentiated to each student’s individual needs (Armstrong, 2012). We know one way special education teachers can increase appreciation for neurodiversity is to presume competence in their students regardless of how a student is presenting (Hughes, 2016), but we do not know how teachers do this. Special education teachers should also lean on a student’s interests and incorporate these passions into their curriculum (Armstrong, 2012). Lang
(2019) speaks to the importance of providing special education teachers with time to expand their understanding of autistic culture. Part of this understanding includes what autistic students need to do to self-regulate in the classroom.

A common theme in the literature includes listening to the voices, literal and/or figurative, of neurodiverse students (Armstrong, 2012; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2020; Kapp et al., 2019). This common theme in the literature also highlights understanding the characteristics presented by autistic students. A recent qualitative study outlined the importance of allowing autistic students to participate in self-stimulatory behavior, also known as “stimming” (Kapp et al., 2019). In this same study, autistic adults highlighted the importance of stimming to assist with intense dysregulation and stated their opposition to changing this behavior (Kapp et al., 2019). Similarly, in a study completed by Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017), college students on the spectrum expressed that they do not feel included in their education and spoke to the importance of having a voice in creating a “respectful environment and empowered community” (p. 12). My study’s goal was to understand how special education teachers’ learning environment and teaching philosophy intersect to influence the classroom experiences of neurodiverse learners.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the body of literature related to my research topic, outlined the critical disability theory, and described how my study fills the gaps in the current body of literature. This literature review covered the following topics: (a) controversial history of autism, (b) ableism, (c) critical disability theory, (d) shift to neurodiversity, and (e) manifestation of oppressive normativity in the classroom. I was transparent about the existence of ableism in our society and how critical disability theory can provide the appropriate lens for this study.
The literature review showed there are no qualitative studies that sought to discover the perceptions of special education teachers on oppressive normativity and neurodiversity. The studies that were found included literature on the history of autism, the presence of ableism, techniques and therapies used for students on the spectrum, and recommendations for professionals working with autistic students. There were a number of studies on the importance of appreciating neurodiversity; however, none of those studies looked at the perceptions of special education teachers.

While much is known about ableism in schools, the significance of this study was to understand how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom and adapt their approach and curriculum for neurodiverse learners. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education and critical disability theory by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity. Understanding special education teachers’ practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom can help to shift schools and society from normativity, toward accepting and appreciating differences in neurodiverse students. The next chapter describes my research paradigm and design of this study.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods that I used to conduct this instrumental qualitative case study. As outlined in Chapter Two, I will draw upon critical disability theory to examine how special education teachers perceive and combat oppressive normativity in the classroom. As mentioned in Chapter One, oppressive normativity is used in this dissertation as a term describing the discrimination of students on the autism spectrum based on their characteristics deviating from what is considered atypical or from the “norm.”

Students on the autism spectrum exude neurodiversity and are often at risk of experiencing oppressive normativity. Armstrong (2012) described neurodiversity in special education as a “paradigm shift in how we think about kids in special education. Instead of regarding these students as suffering from deficit, disease, or dysfunction, neurodiversity suggests that we speak about their strengths” (p. 9). Neurodiversity acknowledges the richness and complexity of human nature and of the human brain (Armstrong, 2012).

Utilizing a critical disability theory lens, this study derived from the perspective that individuals on the spectrum experience forced normalcy and ableism every single day (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2013). Methods such as ABA are considered the “gold standard” when working with students on the spectrum; however, ABA has been proven to increase post-traumatic stress (Kupferstein, 2018) and focuses on normative assumptions, rather than individual differences (Milton, 2018). Autism is often looked at from a medical model, viewed as a disorder that needs to be treated, versus from a social model, which views autism as socially constructed (Orsini, 2012).
Many advocates have taken up the concept of neurodiversity, which states that societies need to celebrate neurological differences, rather than observing autism as something that should be cured (Orsini, 2012). It is time the field of special education shifts from a behavioristic to a more humanistic approach (Shyman, 2016). Students on the spectrum should not be forced to conform to society’s expectations of “normal” and should be able to simply be their diverse selves. Autism can be seen as a difference or a disorder, but regardless, the majority of people in society are neurotypical, making it more difficult for teachers to educate marginalized, neurodiverse populations (Owren & Stenhammer, 2013).

In this study, I sought to understand the perceptions of special education teachers on this topic. Despite an increased interest in neurodiversity, there has been little empirical research conducted on the perceptions of special education teachers related to teaching neurodiverse students. Furthermore, little is known about how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiverse learners in their classroom.

**The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

My study, which observed and attended to the perceptions of special education teachers, provided a unique contribution to the literature on autism education and critical disability theory. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the connections between special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom.

**Research Questions**

1. How do special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners perceive oppressive normality in their classroom?
2. How do they combat oppressive normality in their classroom?
3. What techniques do special education teachers use to celebrate neurodiversity and eliminate oppressive normality in their classroom?

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was to understand how special education teachers avoid oppressive normativity in their classroom and adapt for neurodiverse learners. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity. Understanding the relationship between special education teachers and the practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom can help to shift society toward accepting and appreciating differences in neurodiverse students. The findings of my study, which are presented in Chapters Four and Five, can assist special education teachers by informing curriculum and classroom techniques. Lastly, this research study can also create a positive change in the educational career of students on the autism spectrum.

**Research Paradigm**

The following sections describe the research design and methods of the study. I explain the following elements: (a) methods, (b) role of the researcher, (c) population, (d) sampling technique, (e) participants, (f) data-collection procedures, (g) data-analysis procedures, (h) validity and reliability, and (i) ethical issues.

**Methods**

I conducted a constructivist, critical instrumental case study, collecting data through observations and semi-structured interviews. Instrumental case studies examine a single case in order to foster understandings of an issue that may represent other cases (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). In this case, the perceptions of special education teachers regarding oppressive normativity and neurodiversity may be indicative to a broader population. Interviews and
observations were open-ended so participants could share their ideas and perceptions freely (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The constructivist and critical interpretive frameworks informed this study’s methodology. The constructivist epistemology assumes that the researcher and participants co-construct reality. This reality is shaped by the individual experiences of special education teachers working with neurodiverse students and my interpretations of the meaning behind their words. This interpretive framework grounds the research methodology, as themes emerged through interviews and observations. Although I interpreted the participants’ reality, I relied as much as possible on the participants’ views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of oppressive normativity and neurodiversity and not my own. This facet is discussed further in the next section on reflexivity.

The critical ontological belief was chosen because it is my hope that through a critical disability theory lens, this work will enact change in how special education teachers view their neurodiverse students and provide insights into areas of further professional development. Epistemologically, I anticipate that the reality of special education teachers can be altered in the long term by focusing on how they can celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom and begin to recognize and combat unintentional ways that oppressive normativity is displayed.

**Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity**

My role as the researcher in this study has multiple layers that is rooted in family and passion for my work. As a sister of a neurodiverse individual, fighting for respect and gratitude for this population is not a strange role to me. My first connection with this research topic was when I was young. I specifically remember my parents upset in the kitchen because my brother was experiencing “forced normalcy” by his middle school principal. They struggled to find an
ally in their battle to allow him to be who he is. There were few teachers, clinicians, or administrators in the 1990s who understood neurodiverse students and my family experienced that firsthand. Although I was young, I remember those experiences vividly.

At the time, I was not privy to how my upbringing would affect my practice as a special educator. I have found, however, that my experiences shaped who I strive to be as a professional. I knew I wanted to be a teacher in my sophomore year of high school and I quickly gravitated toward working with neurodiverse students. There was something so rewarding, challenging, and pure about my students, that I could not imagine myself working with a different population.

I have now worked in special education for over 10 years in various settings and positions. I started my career as a teaching assistant and have now worked my way up to directing an education department at a private residential school for students on the autism spectrum. Throughout my career, I have grappled with forced normalcy of my students. I have been called a “hippie” by colleagues for allowing students to be their authentic selves. I feel strongly that special educators should embrace neurodiversity by teaching students about safe boundaries and allowing them to utilize their strengths, skills, and passions to navigate the world around them.

Although I have a strong relationship with the research topic, as a qualitative researcher, I incorporated reflexive thinking as I collected and analyzed the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I kept memos during the research process to reflect on my own personal experiences, the experiences of my participants, and how the intersections of those shape the interpretation of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Another incorporation of reflexive thinking was to limit conversations with the participants about my personal experiences with the research topic. With the purpose of decreasing my interpretations as the researcher, I did not observe or interview
special education teachers at my organization. The first point of contact with special education teachers participating in this study was for the purpose of the research project and there was no prior association.

**Population and Sampling Technique**

The pool from which I attained participants was from special education programs within public school districts in the New York metro area. For the purpose of confidentiality, the pseudonym “Shaker Hills” is used when discussing the site. Students at Shaker Hills come from various local school districts to receive access to specialized programs for students on the autism spectrum. The students at Shaker Hills are within “Level 2” and “Level 3” of severity level according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5). Classes at Shaker Hills range from 6 to 12 students in a class with one special education teacher and 1 to 4 paraprofessionals. The home school district selects the most appropriate staffing ratio consistent with the student’s IEP. A majority of students at Shaker Hills are placed in an 8:1:1 classroom, meaning eight students, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional. As noted by the district representative I worked with to gain access to participants, special education teachers at Shaker Hills receive training in common core learning standards, data-driven instruction, integration of technology into instruction, project-based learning, college and career readiness, positive youth development, instructional strategies, and special education issues.

For the purpose of this study, students’ severity levels were not taken into consideration but rather how teachers adapted to the differences (social, behavioral, sensory, physical, etc.) within their classroom population. Shaker Hills has seven special education programs. Each program is made up of a principal, secretary, social worker, registered nurse, and four to five
special education teachers. I sought to obtain a diverse sample of teachers to match the diversity of the student body, to examine how race and disability intersect.

I utilized a critical purposeful sampling technique to provide a rich example of perceptions of oppressive normativity and neurodiversity as experienced by special education teachers (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). The sampling questionnaire was given to 24 special education teachers in Shaker Hills to identify participants who may be a good fit for the study based on their perceptions and experiences; however, only 10 teachers completed the survey. The sections on the questionnaire requested information on years of teaching experience, types of experience, population of students they work with, teaching methodologies they use in the classroom, and willingness to participate in the study. Specifically, I asked whether teachers used the following teaching methodologies: Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-Based Model, SCERTS® Model, Universal Design for Learning, and Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction, all defined in Chapter One and recognized as pedagogical practices that show appreciation for neurodiversity. These teaching pedagogies were an indicator of a special education teacher who approaches oppressive normativity respectfully, assisting myself as the researcher in further understanding the critical case.

**Participants**

Participants in this study included six special education teachers at Shaker Hills who had experience working with neurodiverse learners. According to Podolsky et al. (2019), teachers improve their practice and effectiveness as they advance in years of experience in the field. Therefore, it was imperative to study special education teachers who had at least five years’ experience working with neurodiverse students and were tenured teachers. Teachers varied in
their experiences and techniques with neurodiverse learners, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

**Data-Collection Procedures**

I obtained permission from Shaker Hills in December 2020 to conduct research in their special education programs. After receiving permission from Shaker Hills, I scheduled a phone call with the Director of Special Education to explain the purpose of the study. My research proposal was defended at the beginning of December 2020. In January 2021, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct research from Molloy College (see Appendix A). After receiving IRB approval, I then disseminated a sampling questionnaire (see Appendix B) to teachers at the school. After purposefully choosing participants and setting dates and times, observations and interviews commenced. I chose the six participants based on their responses to the survey questions. Each special education teacher participated in three 30-minute classroom observations, totaling 1.5 hours of observations, and one interview that lasted up to one hour.

The sample of participants in this study were drawn purposefully to emphasize the ways special education teachers can celebrate neurodiversity, adapt for differences, and approach oppressive normativity. I first contacted the Director of Special Education at Shaker Hills to describe my study and seek interest in participation. Through email, I scheduled a Zoom meeting to discuss my study in detail and request permission to conduct my study in the district. The Director of Special Education verbally agreed and sent consent in writing via email shortly after. I was then put in contact with an administrative assistant at the district who sent me the 24 email addresses of all teachers working with neurodiverse students in the district. I worked closely with the administrative assistant throughout the data-collection process to acquire six participants.
All six special education teachers participated in three virtual observations of their classroom prior to their interview. I was a complete observer, observing without participating on Zoom. The teachers were observed in their natural setting, teaching a class of neurodiverse students. I took field notes recorded in a semi-structured fashion. The field notes protocol for observations included (a) setting and tone, (b) body language and attitudes of teachers, (c) celebration of neurodiverse learners, and (d) oppressive/forced normalcy (see Appendix C).

After careful observation of special education teachers, I interviewed them over Zoom. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended with the intention of eliciting views and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I actively listened to the participants’ perceptions, interjecting only to summarize, paraphrase, or ask for further explanation (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Questions were geared toward understanding their perception of oppressive normativity in their classroom. An interview protocol (see Appendix D) was developed to answer the research questions, examine themes that emerged during the observation, and to understand the teacher’s perceptions about the phenomenon.

**Data-Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis in this study occurred simultaneously with the data collection and required multiple levels of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To begin, field notes from observations were organized, typed, and visually scanned after each teacher observation. All observation field notes were kept in a separate folder from interview transcriptions. After all observation field notes were typed, interviews were transcribed using Rev.com. Interview transcriptions were then checked for mistakes. Analysis proceeded simultaneously, while other areas of the qualitative study were developing. Data analysis began after the first two interviews had commenced to inform future interviews and begin looking for patterns.
After all of the data from observations and interviews were collected, typed, and scanned, they were organized into two separate folders depending on the source of information. I then read through all of the data, taking notes in the margins and in a separate notebook about general ideas, tone, and the impression of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I then read through margin notes and memos taken in my notebook to start making connections with the data collected. The data were analyzed as singular cases first and then across cases to find common themes.

The data were then coded in Dedoose. Codes were set up according to the common themes, which is discussed in further detail in Chapter Four. The codes evolved throughout the data-analysis process, creating categories to answer the research questions posed. To reduce the total list of categories, similar topics that related to each other were clustered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I did not use pre-determined codes but rather developed in-vivo codes based on the evolving information collected from participants.

The data were then interpreted to make meaning behind the themes. The themes provided the perceptions of special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners and how they perceive oppressive normativity, if and how they combat oppressive normativity, and lastly, the techniques they use to celebrate neurodiversity and eliminate oppressive normativity in their classroom. Lastly, the data brought up new research questions to be examined in the future.

**Trustworthiness**

Yin (2017) acknowledged reliability and validity as limitations of case study designs. To ensure the validity and reliability of this study, I used multiple procedures to check the accuracy or trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To ensure validity, I did member checking by providing participants with the final data analysis report to check if they were an
accurate representation of the participants’ perceptions. Participants received the semi-final product of Chapter Four to read through and reflect on. Participant feedback was then considered for the final, polished data-analysis section. I received feedback from two participants, which was minimal and in support of the findings.

I also provided a detailed description of the setting, and ensured that I stayed in the field for a prolonged amount of time, waited for data saturation, and offered many perspectives about the themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As mentioned previously, my own reflexivity was paramount in creating an open and honest narrative of the participants’ perceptions. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended, “Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretations of the findings is shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin” (p. 200).

To ensure reliability, I designed a detailed case study protocol (see Appendices). There was a separate observation and interview protocol that was followed closely for each participant. Lastly, I checked transcripts multiple times for potential mistakes made during the transcription process.

**Ethical Issues**

Like most research projects, mine is susceptible to ethical issues and considerations. With respect to confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the district studied as well as the participants. As a special educator, I needed to continuously check my bias during the research process. This was done through member checking, field notes, and memos. As a critical researcher, I came into this research project with preconceived notions on the topic; therefore, I relied on my committee members to question my implicit biases about the topic. While collecting and analyzing my data, I had to be reflexive with what I found. To keep the research
process ethical, I reported multiple perspectives as well as contrary findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Summary**

Observing and attending to the perceptions of special education teachers in this study provided a unique contribution to the literature on autism education and critical disability theory. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the connections between special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normality and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity. As mentioned previously, understanding how special education teachers practice neurodiversity in the classroom can help to shift society toward accepting and appreciating differences in neurodiverse students.

My research study is based on social constructivist and critical interpretive frameworks. This case study is instrumental in nature, to foster understandings of an issue that may be representative of other similar cases (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). The research questions were answered through observations and interviews with six special education teachers. Since I have a strong relationship with the research topic, I interpreted the participants’ reality and relied as much as possible on the participants’ views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of oppressive normativity and neurodiversity and not my own. All interviews and observations were transcribed, coded, and then interpreted to find common themes.

The next chapter describes my results by discussing how codes were developed as well as the themes of this study. The themes led to the research findings, which are outlined in Chapter
Four, and lead to a discussion of avenues for future research and implications for practice in Chapter Five.
Chapter Four

Results

In this qualitative case study, I examined how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom. As mentioned in Chapter One, by understanding the perceptions of special education teachers, administrators and policy makers can begin to break down potential barriers such as pedagogical practices, change special education policy and curriculum, and support a neurodiverse classroom. This chapter answers the research questions outlined in the first three chapters by using data from the observations and interviews that I conducted with six special education teachers.

I aimed to understand how the special education teachers in the sample celebrated their neurodiverse learners and provided positive learning experiences by approaching oppressive normativity through a critical disability theory lens. As stated in Chapter Two, critical disability theory challenges society’s negative assumptions about disability and states that disability is a social construct (Hosking, 2008). Critical disability theory provides special education teachers an opportunity to understand how their students’ disability interacts with the classroom environment they design. My goal was to observe each teacher working with neurodiverse learners to fully immerse myself as the researcher in their classroom environment. After observing each teacher three times, I then interviewed them to probe further about their teaching philosophy and techniques they use with their students to avoid forcing normalcy, a practice used often with neurodiverse learners. My findings help to explain each participant’s perception of oppressive normativity in their classroom from a strength-based and passion-based approach, the techniques they used, and how they created a partnership with their students.
As described in detail in Chapter Three, the participants and I met on Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic for three 30-minute observations and an interview that ranged in quantity of time from 39 to 54 minutes, depending on the participant. During each observation, I completed field notes based on the observation protocol and research questions. Field notes were typed and scanned following each observation. Once participants had completed the observations, I scheduled a virtual interview with them on Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Rev.com. I then read through the generated transcriptions to check for accuracy.

I reviewed all field notes and transcripts, taking notes in the margins and in a separate notebook to begin reflecting on the data. Once I read through all the data multiple times, I began to hand-code the data through a critical disability theory lens, using highlighters to determine commonalities. This process was completed multiple times to ensure all relevant data were coded accurately. These hand-codes were then put into Dedoose and transcripts/fieldnotes were coded for further analysis. After analyzing the data multiple times, I began to interpret the data and find common themes, which were then combined into findings.

**Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

Utilizing critical disability theory, my study examined how special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners perceive and approach oppressive normativity in their classroom. It is important to note that all special education teachers in this case study worked in self-contained environments, meaning that all of their students were neurodiverse. As the researcher, I felt it was important to speak to special education teachers who are immersed in the world of neurodiverse education to really understand this phenomenon. My findings answered the following research questions:
1. How do special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom?

2. How do special education teachers combat oppressive normativity in their classroom?

3. What techniques do special education teachers use to celebrate neurodiversity and eliminate oppressive normativity in their classroom?

The main findings were that special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse learners did not perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom because neurodiversity is the standard. Although these teachers seemed to celebrate neurodiversity, there were some instances in which I found normalcy was forced amongst their students, and I dive deeper into this phenomenon later in this chapter. Another main finding highlighted the many techniques (sensory, behavioral, social support, student differentiation, and student choice) that special education teachers used in their classroom to celebrate neurodiversity and provide support to learners. The participants were flexible in their lessons, activities, timing, and approach to account for the various needs of their students. Last but certainly not least, special education teachers in this case study gave students a voice by engaging in what I termed neurodiverse communication empowerment so their education was a partnership. This finding was evident across all classrooms observed. All findings informed areas for future research, which are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Overview

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part One describes the impression I had as the researcher of each special education teacher and how the codes developed the common themes of this study. Although the six participants had commonalities in how they approach oppressive normativity, they all had a unique classroom environment and teaching style. It is therefore
imperative that all the cases are described separately before the common themes and findings are highlighted. Part Two of this chapter describes the four prominent themes and three findings discovered. Lastly, I summarize the chapter based on the findings.

**Part One: Participants**

The following section describes how the six special education teacher participants were obtained, the impressions I had of each participant, followed by a table describing additional demographics relevant to this study. The participants in this study are educators at Shaker Hills, a public school designated for K-12 students with disabilities. As discussed in Chapter Three, students at Shaker Hills come from various local school districts to receive access to specialized programs to work with students on the autism spectrum.

Special education teachers at Shaker Hills work in a more restrictive environment, meaning the level of support in the classroom is higher than what students typically receive in their public school. Shaker Hills serves students with disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school level. Shaker Hills also has a program for early intervention before students are enrolled in elementary school. Although students at Shaker Hills are diverse, the special education teachers in my sample were not. In fact, all teachers in the sample identified as White, reflecting the larger population of special educators in New York State (New York State Education Department Diversity Report, 2019).

As described in Chapter Three, I purposefully selected teachers by sending a survey to all teachers at Shaker Hills through email in February 2021. The brief survey probed participants on their teaching methodology and techniques to determine if they were a good fit for the study. Two teachers who filled out the survey were not a good fit due to their strict behavioral approach in the classroom and lack of understanding of neurodiversity. The survey was sent to about 50
teachers; however, it was completed only by 10 teachers (see Table 1). It is important to note that this research study was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when demands on teachers were paramount. Two teachers expressed interest but stated that they were overworked due to the pandemic and could not take on extra responsibilities.

I sought to find special education teachers who had a solid understanding of neurodiversity, were tenured with over five years’ experience, and worked in varying classroom ratios and grade levels. After reading through each survey, I contacted teachers via email to determine whether they were interested in participating further. By participating, teachers agreed to three observations and one interview. After completing the survey and contacting teachers, I had six special education teachers who agreed to participate.

Table 1

Participant Survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Participant</th>
<th>Years’ Experience</th>
<th>Tenured</th>
<th>Methodology Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>SCERTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>DIR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>UDL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>UDL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ABA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>SCERTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TEACCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ABA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>SCERTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>UDL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Data collection in the form of observations and interviews occurred from March to July 2021. The two teachers who participated in July 2021 taught an extended school year during the summer and agreed to participate during this time. Observations were each 30 minutes long and interviews ranged from 39 to 54 minutes, depending on the amount of information shared by participants. Data were analyzed during the data-collection procedure. Data collection ended when I reached data saturation and had multiple perspectives on the research topic. Table 2 lists participant demographics and background information.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grade Level Teaching</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Classroom Ratio</th>
<th>Friend or Family Member on the Spectrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Grades 1-9 Special Ed.</td>
<td>12:1:1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Grades 1-12 Special Ed. Grades N-6 General Ed.</td>
<td>12:1:4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Teacher of Students with Speech and Language Disabilities</td>
<td>8:1:1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Grades K-12 Special Ed.</td>
<td>8:1:1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Grades 1-6 General and Special Ed.</td>
<td>8:1:1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Grades 7-12 Special Ed./Mathematics</td>
<td>8:1:1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All teachers in this sample lacked racial diversity.
In the next section, I provide vignettes of the six participant teachers in more depth. I thoughtfully chose a quote from each participant interview that highlights their approach to celebrating neurodiversity in their classroom. As previously discussed, I first analyzed each individual case by comparing the observation and interview data of each participant against each other. This allowed me to understand the phenomenon of approaching oppressive normativity and celebrating neurodiversity further. A pseudonym is used for all participants discussed to protect their privacy.

Robert, Elementary, 12:1:4 Ratio

I can guarantee you that this time, next year, they're going to be doing a lot more than they are now, or they're going to be more willing to do that work for me that I'm asking them to do, because we built that relationship. We've established that understanding that this is a partnership.

In his interview, Robert explained that he has a unique opportunity because he has his students for two school years, as opposed to one. This allows him to build upon the positive rapport he creates from the first day of school. I found that during my observations, Robert placed a heavy emphasis on the positive culture of his classroom by giving the students a voice. Students in Robert’s class often called out and were off topic from the curriculum being presented to them. Robert honored their communication by allowing them to share their feelings during the class, regardless of whether it was free time or not. It was palpable that students in Robert’s class felt accepted for exactly who they are. Robert starts each school year with emphasizing the word “respect.” This term is not defined by him as the teacher but rather by the students in his class. Robert celebrates neurodiversity by listening to the students in his class and allowing their voice to have an essential impact on the classroom.
Jennifer, Elementary, 12:1:4 Ratio

Yeah, so I've always said that the students teach me how to teach them. So, depending on the student's disability and needs, that's how I respond. During my observation of Jennifer’s class, I found that she has a multi-sensory approach that honors any slight movement as communication in her students. She considers that every lesson should be differentiated to meet her students’ diverse needs and she does this by utilizing their strengths. Jennifer expressed during the interview that students are the driving force behind her lessons, which are highly motivating and individualized. Jennifer is a lifelong learner who believes her students are capable of anything. She approaches oppressive normativity by denying the notion that her students should learn helplessness. Jennifer follows her students’ lead and tailors her lessons to their individual needs as a means to approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity.

Lindsay, Secondary, 8:1:1 Ratio

If you need to shake, if you need to squeeze, if you need to do anything, that's your body. And that's okay. A body in motion is a learning body.

During my interview with Lindsay, she self-identified as neurodiverse, which brings a unique and powerful lens to her teaching. Her classroom is predictable and places emotions and self-regulation at the forefront. I observed Lindsay take any opportunity to stop a lesson to teach social skills, discuss feelings, and offer opportunities for regulation. She has a strong appreciation for what students need in any given moment. I discovered during my interview with Lindsay that she believes in researching what neurodivergent populations find important so she can create that culture in her own neurodiverse classroom. She provides opportunities for her students to learn through movement and regulate their body while learning. As a neurodiverse
teacher, Lindsay understands that each student has individual differences that account for their learning style. This recognition allows Lindsay to celebrate neurodiversity daily in her classroom.

**Theresa, Secondary, 8:1:1 Ratio**

*I wouldn't say we force normalcy at all. We just let them be who they want to be.*

Theresa is a data-driven teacher who wants her students to understand that they should not ever apologize for being who they are. She places emphasis on being flexible to teach her students the uncertainty of life. She also stresses giving her students a voice and the importance of getting to know your students on a deep level to support all of their needs. While interviewing Theresa, I noticed that her attitude about oppressive normativity is nonchalant because celebrating neurodiversity comes natural to her as a special education teacher. The words “let them” in her quote speak to the societal issues surrounding disability oppression.

**Cathy, Elementary, 8:1:1 Ratio**

*We're here to meet you where you're at and figure out what we can do to make you feel like you're successful. And that's not always the case in a typical classroom.*

Cathy divulged during her interview that she wants her students to feel safe and enjoy going to school. I observed this and saw that she teaches her students through play, by providing hands-on learning experiences. Cathy has no issue with students taking their time and taking each moment at their own speed. She does not feel she has to ever force normalcy upon her students due to her unique classroom set-up. Cathy understands that her classroom environment is not typical and for that reason, she has a special approach to educating her students. I learned during my interview with Cathy that her students are placed with her in an emergency due to
discharge from their previous programs. Due to this quick entrance into her program, her focus was on regulation, trust and relationships, rather than the typical curriculum of her colleagues.

**Ali, Secondary, 8:1:1**

*I've always seemed to make it a safe, comfortable, and inviting environment.*

It was obvious during my observation with Ali that she has a profound rapport with her students and loves to use humor as a means to create that environment in a respectful way. She uses a lot of visuals in her classroom and honors all types of communication. She provides students with breaks as needed and differentiates instruction. I observed and truly felt that her classroom is safe and comfortable. Ali noted in her interview that she understands that to celebrate her neurodiverse learners, she needs to form positive relationships and create a calm learning environment.

**Development of Codes**

In this section, I provide a graphic representation, followed by an explanation of how I developed the codes into themes derived from the different data points (observations and interviews). The codes emerged from the data as the data-analysis process was ongoing. As described in Chapter Three, data analysis began after the first participant completed all three observations and the interview. During the analysis, common codes were discovered individually and across all participants, which informed the four main themes derived from the data. I first analyzed each participant individually by comparing their observations and interviews. I then followed up by analyzing the participants as a group and discovered cross-cutting codes. By combining the codes from individual participants and the group as a whole, four main themes arose and informed the findings of this study.
The first theme is about the learning environment and classroom culture. In fact, the first question of the interview was to describe the learning environment with respect to neurodiverse learners. At the time of the interview, this was an environment I had already been immersed in through the observations; however, I wanted to hear from the participants about how they would describe their classroom. The environment and culture were developed by supportive visuals in the classroom, student and teacher rapport, teaching strategies, and classroom rules. These codes came together to develop the first theme of positive learning environment and classroom culture.

The second theme was the honoring of student voice and intent. All teachers provided varying levels and types of support from a sensory, behavioral, and social standpoint in the classroom. While providing this support, it was evident that the teachers provided students with
choices and opportunities to use their voice literally or figuratively, by honoring their individualized mode of communication. This also spoke to differentiating instruction for students. This theme was discovered during observations and discussed in detail during each teacher’s interview.

The third theme dealt with how special education teachers in this case study fostered student interests, focused on student strengths, and worked to create a positive classroom culture with neurodiversity at the forefront of importance. Another code that was ongoing was the working relationship teachers had with support staff in their classroom. These codes came together to paint the picture of how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity—the third theme in this study.

Lastly, forced normalcy was unfortunately a theme that came across in some of the participants. This was developed by utilizing behavioral approaches, positive behavior support, planned ignoring, prompting, and deficit-based teacher language. Similar to the research on autism education, this theme is controversial and provides the groundwork for future research and conversations regarding special education teachers’ approach to oppressive normativity in the classroom.

Part One of this chapter described how the six participants were obtained for this study. The data from the participant survey and demographics were represented using a table. I then outlined the timeline of my data collection from March to July 2021. Each participant was described in further detail utilizing a quote from their interview and my overall impressions of them as the researcher. Using a figure, I visually represented how the codes were developed and advanced into the themes of this study. The following section describes the themes of this
research study. The themes answer the research questions and provide more avenues for future research on this imperative topic.

**Part Two: Research Themes**

This section discusses the following themes: (a) Learning Environment and Classroom Culture, (b) Student Voice and Intent, (c) Approaching Oppressive Normativity and Celebrating Neurodiversity, and (d) Forced Normalcy. These themes are developed and described using data from the participant observations and interviews. As shown in Figure 1, each theme is broken down by subtheme that assisted in the development. At the conclusion of this section, Chapter 4 is summarized and the final chapter of this dissertation is introduced.

**Positive Learning Environment and Classroom Culture**

While I was observing each special education teacher, my first objective was to understand the participants’ learning environment and classroom culture. I began by observing what the classroom looked like, what was hanging on the walls, the seating available to students, and how content was presented to the students. I wanted to immerse myself in the culture of the classroom, to fully understand what it might feel like for the neurodiverse learners. It is important to note that due to maintaining the anonymity of the students, I was not able to see the students while observing in each classroom and was only able to view the teacher and his or her surroundings. The participants were kind enough to inform me of what I was not able to see on camera when we completed our interview or by showing me pictures of their classroom setup. It was imperative for me to understand what the classroom looked like so I could determine whether or not it was a space that was accepting of neurodiverse populations.

I found that the learning environment in all classrooms was designed to show students that learning is valued. The special education teachers in this study believed that their students
learned best by using visuals and tactile learning opportunities to support their academic content. Teachers included student work on the walls and created a classroom culture that supported relationships between teachers/support staff and students. They also utilized teaching strategies that took their students’ individual differences into account as well as provided classroom rules and expectations. This flexibility that teachers exhibited in the learning environment is discussed below.

**Visuals**

One common factor that cut across all classrooms was that student work was hung up on the walls. This demonstrated to me that the teachers had appreciation for their students by decorating the classroom with work products created by the students themselves. Since I was not able to see the students, my eyes and attention were diverted to other areas of the classroom to understand what each space was like visually and auditorily for the students within it. Robert, an elementary teacher who works in a 12:1:1 ratio, stated in his interview, “Student success is celebrated. It’s a bright classroom. Student work is posted throughout celebrating their progress. It’s an environment that really values learning.”

I noticed that participants who worked with easily stimulated students had fewer posters and student work on the walls, accounting for student differences and adapting the classroom to the needs of the neurodiverse learners inside. This was another example of the flexibility the special education teachers in this study demonstrated. For example, in Jennifer’s elementary-aged 12:1:4 ratio classroom, she provided each student with an individualized visual on their desk. Each visual was modified and different based on what would support that student the most. This differentiation exhibited the participants’ dedication to adapting the environment to their
learners, rather than having the learners adapt to the classroom. To reinforce what I noticed during Jennifer’s classroom observations, she noted the following during the interview:

In my classroom, the students become overstimulated because they can’t process all of the stimuli at once. So, we kind of tone it down in the room. They keep the lights off if it’s not too dark outside. We keep the noise to a minimum and we keep voices down just so we can provide an environment that students can learn in.

The most notable “visuals” in all of the participants’ classrooms were found in Cathy’s elementary-aged, 8:1:1 class. During one of Cathy’s observations, she taught a science lesson about wants and needs. She used live chicks that she had in her classroom to reinforce what humans and animals need, versus what they want. Each student was given an opportunity to observe and hold the chicks while speaking to Cathy about their interpretations of the lesson. I noticed that students were not communicative at their desks until they were given the opportunity to engage with the chicks. I observed that students became more comfortable when they were given this visual and tactile input during their lesson because they were able to interact with what they were learning.

The participants in my study combined visual, tactile, and auditory cues into their lesson to reach students’ various sensory needs. During Robert’s observations, I noted in my field notes that he had a visual of the worksheet assignment in large print on the board. This allowed students to look down at their desk and up front to access the content of the lesson. For two of Robert’s students who required movement during the lesson to remain regulated, the visual up front was accessible by walking up to the front of the classroom. Similarly, Lindsay and Theresa, who taught secondary-aged students at an 8:1:1 ratio, had pictures and words on the SMART board in the front
of the room that reinforced what they were teaching. As the lesson shifted to different topics, they provided visuals that coincided appropriately. Lindsay also underlined keywords on the screen in the reading passages that students were assigned. She would repeat the word and give her students time to process information by looking up and recognizing the underlined word.

I noticed a similar combination of adaptation for senses in Jennifer’s classroom. During Jennifer’s first observation, she was teaching her students pre-reading skills and had them recognize letters. Jennifer was teaching her students letters by providing verbal, visual, and tactile representation of the “letter of the week.” The tactile representation was a cardboard cutout of the letter with ridges. Jennifer walked to each student’s desk to allow them time to process by looking at and feeling the letter. Jennifer noted in her interview that if students need more than one week to understand the content, she extends the lesson until they fully comprehend the material. In Jennifer’s second observation, she read a story while students had tactile representations of the characters on their desk. She allowed students time to play with the characters at their desk while she read them the story. These visual and tactile cues provided students with differentiated learning needs multiple modes or representations to access the curriculum and demonstrated how flexible participants were in creating their lessons.

Additionally, the participants provided a written schedule for students to follow along throughout the school day. Theresa discussed the daily schedule visual she provides in her classroom during her interview and how she differentiates it from school year to school year:

Visuals definitely make a huge difference because they (students) need that. They need the visuals, the schedule. And depending on what students I have that year, it depends on how the schedule looks. This year, it’s posted on the wall and then they type it into their computers. And then they know the schedule for the day.
When you work with a younger group, you have the little icons, the little, sometimes the PECS icons, depending on the level of the child. Sometimes they’re just the words and they check their schedule. They take the activity off, they’ll put it in the finished pocket, things like that. But this year, my students are able to just write it in the morning and follow it along throughout the day. It helps our students; they’re just such visual learners.

Theresa noted the schedule changes she makes each school year. This informed me that she is flexible in her teaching and does not use the same system every year with the expectation that her students will adapt to her technique. Instead, she creates visuals to meet the needs of her current students. This addressed Theresa’s ability to adapt to the neurodiversity in her classroom each year. Theresa exhibited differentiation, which helps to cultivate a positive student/teacher rapport (discussed in the next section).

**Student/Teacher Rapport**

All six of the teachers had a warm and welcoming environment in their classroom. It was evident that they had a positive rapport with their students through the intentional and ongoing development of mutual trust. Relationships between students, support staff, and the classroom teacher played a key role in the learning environment. All six teachers provided opportunities for students to learn relationship-building communication skills through the relationships they shared with staff in the classroom. As noted by Jennifer during her interview:

> My main focus is how the students learn who they are and get to know themselves and increase their self-awareness. How to communicate with somebody else, know that there’s somebody next to you, because to me, that’s the most valuable thing that they can take with them, is connecting with another human being.
Jennifer’s students were all non-speaking and utilized communication devices to relay their wants and needs. As evidenced in the above quote, her students’ communication utilizing a device did not hinder her as a teacher to provide a learning environment conducive to positive relationships with a focus on functional communication. During the observations, Jennifer was flexible and took many opportunities to foster communication and make connections between students and staff. She often paused during lessons to provide natural opportunities for her students to engage with one another. Jennifer noted in her interview that she honors any vocalization or look as an intent to communicate.

The way the participants formed relationships was different across cases. For example, Robert and Ali used humor to grasp the attention of their students. During one observation, a student told Robert he should be a comedian because he had funny jokes. The student stated this while giggling as he waited for the smile from Robert after complimenting him. Ali, who taught secondary-aged students at an 8:1:1 ratio, noted during her interview that she makes her classroom environment safe, comfortable, and inviting by keeping it lighthearted and allowing time for relationship building.

Comparatively, in Jennifer’s class, she builds time in her classroom schedule called “pairing” that is simply reserved for one-to-one relationship building with staff and peers. During this time, demands are not placed on students, teachers observe students, and teachers playfully enter their student’s world. As mentioned in Chapter Two of this dissertation, the natural exploration of the classroom and individuals within it assists a student on the spectrum to relate and communicate with their environment and supports a positive educational environment (Interdisciplinary Council on Development and Learning, 2020). Jennifer recognized that it was imperative to create opportunities for social interaction that is led by her students. I noticed
CELEBRATE NEURODIVERSITY

during Jennifer’s observations her innate ability to use the relationships she formed with her students as a tool during learning opportunities. For example, when a student was not engaged in the lesson, she related the content to their favorite television show to grasp the student’s attention.

With regard to the rapport participants built with their students, there was mutual respect between the special education teacher, support staff, and the students. When asked to describe the learning environment in his classroom, Robert noted, “It’s one of respect. I think we try to really make students understand that not only do we expect them to respect us, but first and foremost, we show our respect for them.” In Robert’s classroom, it was evident that the students grasped this concept and understood that the teachers respected them. When I probed further with Robert to ask how he avoids forcing normalcy with his students, he stated “It’s just the culture of our class. Everybody is respected and everybody learns differently.” This belief held true when observing Robert in the classroom as evidenced by his ability to listen to his students intently and show that he was hearing every word they said through his flexible teaching style. Robert showed this by repeating back what the students said to him and checking for understanding. This gave his students an ability to process as well as correct him if he was not understanding what they were communicating. During his first observation, he repeated back what a student stated and the student corrected him. He apologized and the student thanked him.

Theresa showed respect for her students by holding herself accountable to the same expectations the students are held to. As a teacher, she said she takes self-reflection seriously to ensure she is being honest and equitable with her students. For example, one of the expectations in her classroom is to be flexible. She stated in her interview, “If I expect them to be flexible, I myself need to be flexible.” This also held true in her classroom observations, as noted by her
ability to adapt to how students were presenting at any given moment. Theresa had an innate ability to adapt her lesson based on the level of regulation her students were showing. If they were regulated and engaged, she would push more; if they were dysregulated, she would pull back and provide them with more time and space to access the curriculum. The teaching strategies used by the participants are discussed in the next section.

**Teaching Strategies**

I consistently observed the participants demonstrating flexibility when they used multiple modalities and presentations of the lesson to hook diverse learners in the classroom. All six teachers used visual aids to support the main idea of the lesson. Four of the six teachers used a picture to support learning the content. One teacher replicated the worksheet students were given in large print on the board and highlighted the problems as he went along. One teacher used hands-on manipulatives pertaining to the lesson as a visual and tactile aid. Lindsay, in particular, had a vastly neurodiverse group of students in her classroom. When asked to describe the learning environment for neurodiverse learners in her classroom, Lindsay stated:

> We try to make it a multi-learning system. There’s auditory input. There’s visual input. We respect children’s need to take a break. We have flexible seating in our classrooms so they can bounce on a chair. We have a standing desk. We have sensory toys so they can keep their hands occupied, so that their minds are open, because they don’t need to fight their body for a sensory need and they can just kind of get the input they need and then do the learning. So, I think we have a really highly structured environment, with a lot of visual supports and a lot of different outlets for our students.
Similarly, when asked the same question, Jennifer proved her understanding of creating a neurodiverse classroom when she affirmed, “It’s a multisensory approach to learning. So, depending on the student’s needs, that’s how I present material: tactile, visual or auditory.” When I probed further on how she determines which input each student is receiving, she responded, “I’ve always said that the students teach me to how to teach them. So, depending on the student’s disability and needs, that’s how I respond.” I noticed that Jennifer paced her lessons and never seemed to be in a rush. She allowed her students to set the pace of the class based on how they were responding to the content. This was similar to what Ali described during her interview; she noted that she provides opportunities for students to work one on one based on how they are presenting from day to day. These one-on-one sessions are then tailored to the learning needs of each individual student.

**Figure 2**

A student’s desk in Robert’s elementary 12:1:1 class.
Individualization was a core value for Robert as a teacher. Figure 2 shows that Robert has an individualized desk for one of his students with passion pictures, a sensory toy, noise-cancelling headphones, and board-to-block visual input. Additionally, I recognized that he provided students multiple ways to show their understanding of content during his observations. For example, during one observation, he noticed that a student could not verbally explain how he got the correct answer and allowed him to draw instead. I discussed this with Robert during our interview and he indicated:

If we’re working in a particular area and we want to see a project that demonstrates understanding, well, they can choose. There’s typically nine things that a student can do to demonstrate an understanding on a choice board. They can pick two of those that will show us that they have comprehension of material, but it’s not through a typical process of either taking a test or writing a lengthy essay, or even some long answer responses, again with pencil and paper. So, some of the things they could do might include creating a jeopardy board game and then presenting that to the class. Another thing we do quite regularly is we have students make iMovies that they’re really engaged with and it’s just another way for them to demonstrate understanding.

We also discussed a student who struggles with writing but is able to demonstrate her understanding in creative ways. For example, during a research project about Alexander Hamilton, rather than writing an essay, Robert created a mock interview project where he interviewed the student and she responded as if she were Hamilton himself. He discussed with me how happy his student was gathering information and sharing it out, whereas if she were
required to do an ordinary writing assignment, she would have struggled. Additionally, Robert discussed even adapting the utensils students are using during assignments. For example, he indicated that he allows students who struggle with fine-motor skills to use chunky markers. This differentiation and teaching strategy created a positive learning environment for his student in a unique and celebratory fashion. Another aspect of the positive learning environment were the expectations that teachers had for their students.

Classroom Rules

I found that two of the six educators, Robert and Lindsay, had classroom “rules” that they enforced during observations and spoke about during their interviews. Initially, I was concerned when I discovered this as I was worried that these rules might be based heavily off of societal “norms” and could potentially be a sign of forcing normalcy in their classroom. When I probed on this topic during my interviews with these two participants, I learned that these rules were created in conjunction with the students at the beginning of the school year. Robert clarified during his interview:

There’s one rule that I have, and I start each year with this, and that’s the idea that our rule is respect. We respect ourselves, we respect each other, and we respect learning. We talk about the word respect, but then it branches off into what that looks like for each of those three categories.

I then probed further with Robert and questioned how he teaches the meaning of respect and the language he uses with his students. He stated:

So, the first thing that we always do is we write the word respect on a dry-erase board and then we break it into those three categories. And then we ask students for feedback on what that looks like when we’re talking about respecting yourself.
And it might be ‘trying my best, working hard, effort’. What does respect look like when you’re respecting others? ‘Being kind, treating them fairly, helping when I can help’. And then what does respect learning look like? So, just breaking it down into those three categories.

It was evident that although the word “rules” can have a negative connotation, the creation of these expectations was designed in a partnership between staff and students. The students identified what respect meant to them and that was honored by their teacher. Likewise, Lindsay created overarching classroom rules and had her students define them. She noted:

So, when we came up with the rules, it was like what do we need to do to be successful? What can we do to be successful in this classroom and also out in the community? And that’s kind of how we came up with those rules. And they’re ‘be flexible, focus on yourself, keep your hands, feet and mouth…had to add mouth…to yourself.

Both teachers surveyed the students in their class to discover what was important to them and what they felt should be expected of them and their peers in the classroom. The participants gave their students ownership over the classroom expectations rather than dictating rules. The rules or expectations then laid the groundwork for the partnership between all contributing members, which was overarching of the environment within the classroom. This assisted in creating a positive classroom culture built on mutual respect and appreciation for each learner’s diverse needs.

**Conclusion**

As stated earlier in this section, my first goal as the researcher was to understand the learning environment and dissect ways in which it supported a neurodiverse classroom. I found
that four key factors contributed to the celebration of neurodiversity in this case study. First, special education teachers understood the importance of providing a multi-sensory approach to learning by providing visuals, opportunities for hands-on learning, and tactile experiences, and most importantly, adapting lessons to meet each student’s diverse individual needs to learn most effectively. Second, teachers understood that the key to learning for neurodiverse students is in their relationships with those they learn from. Some of the participants expressed that when their classroom was a “partnership” versus a dictatorship, students were more willing to engage in the learning environment.

Another factor that contributed to a positive classroom environment were the teaching strategies used by the participants. Language is discussed in more detail later in this chapter; however, a key factor I listened to was the way the participants spoke about their students and the language they used. Last, to reinforce the teacher-student partnership, a few participants created classroom rules or expectations together with their students (discussed in more detail in Chapter Five). In the next section of this chapter, I discuss how participants valued their students’ voices, literal or figurative, and their intent.

**Student Voice and Intent**

The classes I observed had a variety of student profiles, including diverse sensory profiles, communication styles, and learning needs. The makeup of the classes I observed were truly neurodiverse within and across cases in this study. Participants were required to watch, listen, and adapt to the ever-changing needs of their students by being flexible. A common theme that cut across many of the cases was providing the students with sensory, behavioral, and social support to meet their individualized learning styles. In her interview, Ali, who taught a secondary-aged class at an 8:1:1 ratio, discussed incorporating movement into her lessons to
provide natural ways for students to remain regulated. She spoke about creating learning stations so her students could move around the room in whichever way supported their individualized learning needs.

Additionally, another common theme across cases was honoring students’ voices, listening to their concerns, and addressing them respectfully. Being that some of the participants’ students were non-speaking, I also noticed them honoring body movements, facial expressions, and vocalizations as intentional communication. Jennifer, an elementary teacher who taught in an 8:1:4 ratio was particularly respectful in recognizing her students’ desire to communicate and taught them that their body has meaning.

This section discusses the second theme, student voice and intent in detail, touching upon the two sub-themes: sensory/behavioral/social support and student voice/student choice. In the first sub-theme, I discuss the strategies the participants in this study utilized to provide support to their students. In the second sub-theme, I discuss how the participants honored their student’s voices and made them an integral part of the learning process by providing choices. Both sub-themes assist in answering the research questions in this study as well as providing avenues for further research to be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

**Sensory/Behavioral/Social Support**

The participants utilized a variety of strategies that provided sensory, behavioral, and social support to provide a neurodiverse classroom that was conducive for learning. During my observations, I listened intently on how the six special education teachers adapted and modified lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students. I wrote down specific questions I had about these strategies that I wanted to follow up on during our interview. When I interviewed the
participants, I probed further on what I observed and asked specific questions related to these strategies.

First, I found that throughout my interviews, three of the six participants discussed the importance of providing movement breaks during the lesson to assist their students in remaining regulated and engaged. Two of the three teachers, Cathy and Lindsay, who taught elementary and secondary, respectively, at an 8:1:1 ratio, provided built-in movement breaks during their lesson. For example, the students would work for 20 minutes and then have a “brain break” in which they engaged in multiple pre-determined exercises. Cathy stated that she observes her students’ body language and behavior to determine when they need a break for movement to remain regulated and engaged in her lessons. For example, if she noticed her students engaging in challenging behavior or fidgeting in their seat, she would then provide a break, rather than pre-determining those breaks. She would use these moments to teach her students how to self-advocate for their needs. Cathy explained that this sets students up for success to appropriately request breaks in the future.

These movement breaks took necessary time away from engaging with academic content to give students the sensory input they needed to learn. During Cathy’s observations, I noticed she was not preoccupied with getting through academic content, and followed a semi-structured lesson in which her students were the driving force on the pace of instruction. For example, if she noticed that her students needed quiet time or a walking break, she would provide that for them, even if it was time for them to complete an academic activity. During Cathy’s interview, she expanded upon this observation:
The focus is not on academic completion or academic level—anything. We’re here to meet you where you’re at and figure out what we can do to make you feel like you’re successful. And that’s not always the case in a typical classroom.

While observing Cathy’s class, I noticed that her innate ability to understand what her students needed at any given moment provided her students with avenues for success. Cathy did not force normalcy upon her students but rather provided opportunities for individualized success, regardless of their differences. I noticed similarities in Lindsay’s classroom and was able to dig deeper into this theme when interviewing her. Cathy and Lindsay took these strategies a step further by teaching their students self-awareness and providing them with an understanding of how to advocate for themselves. Lindsay noted the various ways she assists her students with communicating their intent by stating:

Sometimes our students aren’t always ready to kind of recognize and self-regulate. I do a lot with emotion and self-recognition. We do the check-in. So, if I see a student who’s kind of really rocking and doing a lot of movement, I might say ‘Oh, you know what? Do you need to change your seat? You can use the standing desk, or you can use the bounce chair. It looks like your body has a lot of energy. How do you feel?’ And they’ll kind of identify, ‘No, I’m okay. I’m ready. I just needed that one and done’. Or they’ll kind of identify, ‘No, I need some more input.’

By doing these constant check-ins with her students, she not only showed them that she was in tune and respected them but also that her students can recognize their own bodies and advocate for their needs. After Lindsay discussed the multiple seating choices for students in the quote above, I asked her if students were able to change their seat in the middle of a lesson to which
she replied, “absolutely.” It was evident during our interview that she was aware of her students’ needs and avoided forcing normalcy by providing her students multiple seating options and opportunities for regulation during class.

Not only did the participants utilize sensory and behavioral strategies, but they also implemented strategies to provide social support. During Robert’s interview, we discussed how he handles situations where students struggle to see each other’s differences in his elementary-aged 12:1:4 classroom. He affirmed:

I never really thought about it. It’s just the culture of our class. So, they certainly wouldn’t hear from a teacher, but even amongst themselves, I never hear a student say, ‘Well, how come he gets to do that and I have to do this’ It’s just the culture. Everybody is respected and everybody learns differently. And I think we convey that message from the time I start with students, right until the day they leave us. And we just remind students that we’re all different and we remind them of our rule of respect. But I have to say in my class, it (bullying or pointing out differences) doesn’t happen that often. Everybody just does their own thing and isn’t focused on what everybody else is doing.

For Robert, understanding and accepting others is not an option in his classroom. By providing a classroom that was accepting of each other’s differences, Robert’s students have learned awareness of their own differences but also those of their peers. This positive learning culture was evidence of celebrating neurodiversity.

Although the teachers demonstrated ways they celebrate neurodiversity, they also explained barriers in doing so. Lindsay, Ali, Theresa, and Jennifer all noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a challenge to them in providing students exactly what they need at any
given moment. As mentioned previously, data for this research study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some teachers were teaching students in-person and remote. The pandemic was perceived to be more challenging and stressful for caregivers of autistic students, as compared to their neurodiverse counterparts (Manning et al., 2021). The participants in this study confirmed that finding. Lindsay noted that her classroom layout changed, which hindered her ability to provide social interaction. She stated the following:

   Right now, they’re at their desks, and they’re kind of on islands. Before we had like a horseshoe shape so they could see each other. They were closer. We used to push the tables in so they could work together.

Ali confirmed what Lindsay said, “We couldn’t really do a lot of hands-on activities this year,” which pointed to their inability to meet sensory needs during COVID-19. Similarly, Jennifer mentioned that a multi-sensory room she was able to use in previous school years was off limits during the pandemic to mitigate exposure. She stated, “That’s something I would like to change. I would like to go back to pre-COVID, where the students had an opportunity to leave this world and go and have their senses become more aware” in the sensory room.

Providing support for students’ sensory, behavioral, and social needs was imperative to the celebration of neurodiversity. This theme allowed me to understand how the participants approached oppressive normativity. Participants also exhibited the ability to provide students with choices and give their students a voice. This subtheme is discussed in the next section.

**Student Choice/Student Voice**

Neurodiverse students learn in multi-faceted ways and therefore a “one size fits all” approach does not provide a learning environment conducive to success (Armstrong, 2012). The participants in this study recognized this and often provided choices so students could learn in
the way that fit their needs most appropriately. A common theme across cases was providing choices to students during a lesson. Student choice spoke to the teacher-student partnership that many of the participants strove for in their classrooms. Participants gave students choices on how they show understanding and how they communicate in their classroom environment.

Four of the six teachers provided choices embedded into their lessons. For example, in all three observations with Theresa, she provided two choices for every activity. This gave students some autonomy over their environment and offered them an opportunity to self-advocate for the option that best fit their needs. Cathy also provided choices within her lessons and honored students’ communication regarding those choices. Additionally, a number of Cathy’s students were not always willing to make a choice, so she provided them time and space to regulate, instead of forcing them to make a choice or making the choice for them.

A common theme across participants was listening to students’ voices by making them feel heard and appreciated, a term I coined neurodiverse communication empowerment. This varied in simply allowing opportunities for students to express themselves, as well as honoring diverse communication styles, such as vocalizations, sign language, or intentional body movements and language. I noticed many occasions in which students would interrupt the lesson to discuss something on their mind. Several participants stopped the lesson to allow the students to express themselves and share a story or comment with the class. It was evident that what the students had to say was important to them, and the participants acknowledged that by allowing them to share in real time. Although a majority of teachers allowed participants to express themselves when they saw fit, two teachers did not and asked the students to wait until the lesson was over. This is discussed in more detail in the forced normalcy section of this chapter.
During Jennifer’s observations, I recognized a unique outlook on her student’s communicative intent. Jennifer works with students who are all non-speaking; however, this did not impact her students’ ability to communicate throughout each and every class. What I observed was a teacher who had the utmost respect for acknowledging intent to communicate in her students. Jennifer further substantiated this during her interview when she stated the following:

I’m teaching them that their body movement is being acknowledged. And I always tell the students, ‘make your voices known, make your voices known’. We use a lot of assistance; we use a lot of assistive technology in the classroom. We use a switch to say ‘hello’, a lot of devices. I use those in the classroom, but I love hearing what…what their bodies can naturally do on their own. So, most of them do have some sort of vocalization. So, I like to use that and kind of bring it to the other level and have it be a learning experience. So, I spent a lot of time on that greeting activity that you observed and it’s so repetitive. And then we do it every single day, you know, but I feel it’s very important for the students to be able to communicate and let their voices be known.

During the greeting activity that Jennifer referenced in the above quote, students take turns communicating to their classroom community in their own unique ways. Some students use an assistive device, while others vocalize or utilize gestures and facial expressions to communicate. This activity taught Jennifer’s students that their individualized way of communication is honored and respected. Similarly, Lindsay also gave her students a voice and acknowledged the meaning behind their vocalizations. When observing Lindsay, one student vocalized during the lesson when he was dysregulated. Lindsay acknowledged the student by stating, “Wow, I’m
feeling frustrated too. I hear you.” She would then pause to allow the student processing time on her acknowledgement. Both teachers honored their students’ communication and celebrated their neurodiversity by appreciating their various ways of interacting with others.

**Conclusion**

In this section, I discussed student voice and intent, while connecting the two sub-themes, sensory/behavioral/social support and student voice/student choice. Neurodiverse students often struggle to relate and communicate with others in their environment (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Additionally, neurodiverse learners often do not have much autonomy over what they learn and how they access the curriculum (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Participants in this case study understood that it was imperative to provide students with the opportunity to make their voices known, advocate in their own diverse way, and choose learning activities. The next section highlights how the participants specifically approached oppressive normativity and celebrated neurodiversity in their classroom.

**Approaching Oppressive Normativity and Celebrating Neurodiversity**

As declared in Chapter Two of this dissertation, critical disability theory provides special education teachers an opportunity to understand how their student’s disability interacts with the classroom environment they design. It begs the question of whether their classroom environment is conducive to neurodiverse learners, a facet I observed and inquired about in all cases in this study. In this section, I illuminate how special education teachers in this case study approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom. A majority of this section focuses on my participant interviews and the questions I posed to them after observing their classroom.
In this section, I discuss the third theme, approaching oppressive normativity and celebrating neurodiversity, through four sub-themes. The first sub-theme shows how the special education teachers in this study utilized their students’ interests to celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom. The second sub-theme outlines how autism is discussed with students and assists them in understanding their diagnosis. The third sub-theme speaks to some of the limitations the participants have when faced with oppressive normativity. Last, the participants discussed how they train support staff in their classroom to support the celebration of neurodiversity.

**Fostering Student Interests**

One aspect prevalent in my classroom observations was that special education teachers used their students’ interests and strengths in their lessons to reinforce the content they were teaching. Students were more engaged in the learning process and content being presented by the teacher because the lesson focused on what they were interested in, as well as their individualized strengths. For example, Theresa incorporated music that her students liked, to keep them engaged during classroom lessons and movement breaks. When I probed further, Theresa, who taught secondary-aged students at an 8:1:1 ratio, stated:

> We really do try to foster their interests. Even during a group, if we’re talking, we always try and give examples of each one of their interests. So, we have one student who loves wrestling, so we’ll give an example for wrestling. And then we have another one who likes Backyardigans, we’ll give the example for that. So, we definitely try to, during each group, if we’re giving an example of something one of them loves, we make sure we give an example they all love. So, if we’re doing word problems, we’ll make up a word problem with something they love.

Even with the music we listen to, like once a day, we do movement breaks and we
CELEBRATE NEURODIVERSITY

bring “Just Dance” up on YouTube and we make sure that we circulate around the room to make sure we do a song they each like.

I was able to witness student engagement in the lesson and strong relationships with the teacher when they are utilizing student passions.

Similarly, Jennifer incorporated classroom jobs around her students’ passions and strengths in her elementary-aged class. For example, one of her students had a fantastic sense of humor and was in charge of the “joke of the day.” Jennifer incorporated research, reading, and public speaking skills into his job by having him search, read, and write the joke, and then report the joke back to the class. During our interview, she explained the following:

Well, I have a student in my class who has an awesome sense of humor. He has a wonderful sense of humor and he enjoys interacting with other people and one-to-one interactions. That’s one of his strengths. Social skills. So, because of that, he is in charge of the joke of the day. And every single day, we go over a list of jokes and I tell him, ‘Okay, when I come to one you like, let me know by raising your hand, vocalizing, letting me know that’s the joke you want.’ And he does, and he laughs. And then I record that joke on the step-by-step device. And then he shares that joke with everybody.

Jennifer was able to identify a responsibility for her student in her classroom community that enhanced her student’s strength. Additionally, the student she was describing is non-speaking. She did not let that hinder his ability to engage in a public-speaking activity by supporting him in using his alternative communication device to carry out this responsibility. Jennifer’s example shows how she celebrated neurodiversity and approached oppressive normativity head on by diminishing the barriers for this student.
During my interview with Cathy, who also taught at the elementary level, we discussed how she fosters her students’ interests in enjoying school. Many of Cathy’s students have been asked to leave their previous program due to unsafe behaviors. She determined ways she turns this feeling around for her students and makes them feel accepted:

Usually when kids start, we have the social worker, who pulls the kids out to do individual counseling. We try and do mindfulness with them to where they’re all kind of doing similar things. We try and give them free time to play with each other. Right now, we’re doing a Lego contest and they all have their own bin of Legos, but they get to share and look at each other’s things, try and do a lot of socialization. That’s more student centered. We have Pokemon Card Club, which is really kind of appropriate social skills, right? They have to all sit at a table together, show each other the cards, wait for someone to respond, decide if they want to trade or not. They don’t know that they’re learning emotional regulation while they’re doing all these things that they think is fun. I think having flexibility to be able to do that and not have to focus so much on the academic demands really lends its hand to emotional stability.

This excerpt from Cathy’s interview illustrated her understanding of her neurodiverse learners and their needs. She is able to take the learning process slow with her students and ensure their basic needs are met first. Additionally, her ability to sprinkle in learning through fun and engaging activities was evidenced during her observations.

**Focusing on Students’ Strengths**

Another aspect of a neurodiverse classroom was determining how and when to discuss autism and assist students with understanding their diagnosis. One of the participants in
particular discussed her journey with speaking about disability with her students. Lindsay questioned speaking about students’ diagnosis with them by stating:

Typically, I don’t know if we’re actually allowed to say, ‘Oh, you’re autistic.

That’s why your brain’s like that’, because it’s a very tricky subject because of their age and parents. So, when we do Newsela, and it’s someone we talk about like, ‘Oh, this person has autism and they made Nintendo games. That’s amazing.

Their brains different, and look what cool thing they made.’

She discussed the importance of students understanding their disability and bringing that to the forefront of her lessons, an attribute that is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. Lindsay also recognized the importance of students understanding their diagnosis by asserting:

We talk about brains. We talk about how brains are different. When we can bring in interesting news article about neurodivergent people, we talk about it. We talk about our strengths. They’ll be like, ‘You know what? It might be hard for me to learn these friendship skills, but I’m amazing at math.’ And we have them identify their strengths and kind of self-identify, and that’s how we try to celebrate them as being unique individuals.

By discussing the science behind neurodiversity in her classroom, Lindsay’s students are able to understand their differences and see them as strengths.

Robert also used students’ strengths and passions in his lessons, which I observed on multiple occasions during his observations. When asked what strength-based and passion-based learning is like for the learners in his classroom, he noted:

I think my students have a good understanding that as neurodiverse learners, there are lots of opportunities for them to learn, but opportunities for them to express
how they learned or how they have been able to comprehend something. So, we don’t just look at traditional pencil-and-paper types of tasks to show understanding. There are lots of ways that students in my class can do that.

He added later:

When they first start with me, I do kind of an intake inventory of their acquired mastered skills. And then I have them work only on those mastered skills when they’re doing assignments so that they’re successful in what they do.

Robert also discussed that student success is celebrated in his classroom, which was also evident during his classroom observations. He often stopped the lesson to highlight positive moments for his students and honored their learning styles. I observed that the celebration was reciprocal; students in his classroom also distinguished Robert as their teacher and were excited to offer him compliments. Robert noted during his interview, “There’s a real sense that learning is taking place here,” which was apparent during his observations. During my interview with Robert, we discussed explicitly how he approaches oppressive normativity. He responded:

We try really hard in this room to let them be who they are, because we have students who are 17, but they enjoy Toy Story. They enjoy the Backyardigans; they enjoy things like that. And for 17, that’s not ‘normal.’ But so, we kind of let them be who they are. So, I don’t know that we really, I wouldn’t say we force normalcy at all. We just let them be who they want to be.

As I discussed previously in this chapter, the positive culture and relationships between students and staff in Robert’s classroom were exuded during my observations of his class. It was evident that he had created a classroom that was accepting and appreciative of neurodiversity. I discuss the specific language from Robert’s quote in the next section.
Although the special education teachers in this case study celebrated neurodiversity and approached oppressive normativity with respect to individual students, they also discussed limitations to their teaching approaches. The most notable limitations were state testing and the overall systemic culture in special education. These limitations are discussed in the next section.

**Limitations to Facing Oppressive Normativity**

As argued in Chapter Two, schools and classrooms, specifically special education classrooms, are unfortunately hindering autistic students with hidden ableism (Timberlake, 2020). This hidden ableism establishes itself in pivotal areas of the classroom experience, such as in pedagogy, curriculum, and interactions with students. Critical disability theory, the lens of this dissertation, validates that classrooms socially construct disability as a deficit or limitation, rather than a quality to be further understood, accepted, and appreciated. The special education teachers in this case study understood critical disability theory and discussed it during their interviews with me.

Cathy discussed some of the issues with special education in general, similar to some of the findings in Chapter Two. She noticed the pressure put on students, especially those with emotional dysregulation, to rush through the schedule. She noted during her interview:

There’s so much pressure to catch up all the time. Catch up with this, catch up with that, hurry up and eat your lunch, hurry up we’re going inside, put everything away, everyone’s waiting for you. And it’s just, schools especially, are built on a design of failure and who’s falling through the cracks, and then we’ll figure out how to help them. If someone would just slow down and say, ‘Well, this student is doing what they need to do, but they’re just going a little slower, and that was okay, that was okay with them, that was okay with their parents, that
was okay with the kids in the class’; the emotional dysregulation wouldn’t be so
scarring.

As discussed previously, Cathy is not held to state standards or testing in her classroom. She is
able to slow down the learning process for students to remain regulated and supported. It is my
view that teachers like Cathy, who are awarded the time to think about what students really need,
should be an example to others in special education who are forced to comply to the current
trends in special education.

During my discussion with Ali, she mentioned New York State Exams several times as a
barrier not only for her students but also for her as a teacher. She stated:

I think there are times when neurodiverse learners don’t have opportunities to
demonstrate their ability to be neurodiverse learners. For example, when I think of
state assessments that are coming up, we do make some accommodations, but
they’re still very limited. So, somebody that doesn’t do well on a multiple-choice
test or exam is still going to have that difficulty and we’re limited as far as how
we can present or the accommodations we can make for those diverse learners.
There are also some constraints for our students when they go out to the
mainstream learning environment. In my program, our goal has always been to
provide those opportunities for students when we feel a student can or is ready to
make that leap, however, because we sometimes have to then adhere to the rules
of a different classroom and they may not be as flexible or not as willing to
consider alternatives in the ways to responding to comprehension questions, or for
students to show understanding that becomes sometimes a challenge for our
students.
Ali touched upon how state testing and mainstream education can be challenging because there is not the same flexibility for her students that she provides in her classroom. This spoke to larger societal issues in education and the barriers to appropriate education for neurodiverse learners. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

I also discussed with participants how they approach oppressive normativity and avoid forcing normalcy in their classroom. Several of the participants stated that they “let them be who they are.” This quote was interesting to me because of the word “let.” It highlighted that special education teachers have to give permission to their students to be their authentic selves, rather than this being the standard in the classroom. Jennifer expanded upon her approach to oppressive normativity:

One thing that I emphasize in the classroom—and I probably drive everyone crazy with it, but it’s something that’s really important—is to avoid the learned helplessness. You know, these students, they can learn to be helpless, so like, hitting a switch. So, if they hit a switch, I have observed a lot of people doing it for them. And how are they ever going to learn that they can do it themselves if people are doing it for them? So, they’re actually learning for other people to just do it. So, one thing I really emphasize is wait time, and that it drives people crazy because it’s hard for people to wait. I will just say, ‘I will wait because I want the students to know that I believe in them. I know that they can do it. And I expect for them to do it’.

Jennifer was an example of how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity. Jennifer’s students were all non-speaking and required a great deal of support. From the perspective of critical disability theory, her classroom environment was not disabling to her
students and she avoided teaching her students that their disability is a barrier to their success. However, during our discussion, she brought up another barrier to supporting a neurodiverse classroom, which was training support staff.

**Training Support Staff**

Several of the participants noted that their interactions with support staff can create difficulties when they do not understand neurodiverse qualities. Oftentimes, support staff only understood characteristics of the students’ disability. Lindsay spoke to how she supports her classroom support staff in understanding the meaning behind the students’ behavior:

And I’ll be like, ‘They’re not being bad. They’re not being bad. It’s just they’re having a hard time. Their brains are different. Their brains can’t process this. They might have co-occurring OCD and they need to move that velcro a couple of times. It’s not hurting anyone. So, let’s just let them do that. But you know what they’re going to be? They’re going to be super neat. I bet you they’re going to be wonderful when you get into life skills and they need to clean things, and they’re going to want things in order. When those boxes are a mess, I bet you that’s a helper, and highlighting what they can do and how they can help you.’

While observing Lindsay’s class, I noticed what she discussed during her interview. There were several occasions when support staff would ‘punish’ students who exhibited challenging behaviors, rather than approaching their behavior as a form of communication. I asked Lindsay about how she trains her support staff. She noted:

I think it’s a matter of training, and it’s a matter of saying it again and again. This is our school culture. And this is what I’m expecting in my classroom and as a team that we celebrate these kids and we understand they’re having a hard time.
And even when they frustrate us, and they do, we still have to come from a place of caring and wanting to educate. So, I think it’s just they (support staff) struggle, but it’s an education moment, and the big thing I like to do is give them my ‘Why?’ ‘Why am I doing this?’

As a veteran educator, Lindsay is able to teach her support staff how to recognize characteristics of autism and provide students with a respectful classroom environment with educators that support their needs. As discussed in Chapter Two, the difficulties that autistic individuals face are less about their characteristics of autism and more about how those characteristics intersect with humanity and their environment (Stenning, 2020). Lindsay aimed to make her classroom environment stronger by training her staff to recognize the neurodiversity within it.

I also discussed support staff with Robert. During one of my observations, I noted in my field notes that an assistant asked a question in the middle of the lesson that took him off topic. Robert carefully answered the question and redirected his assistant back to the lesson. Robert discussed his frustration when assistants in his classroom are on their phones while he is teaching. He added:

In my opinion, and this is the point that I’ve made to my staff is that it undermines the importance of education. It says to our students that, ‘Yeah, what you’re doing is important, but this thing right here, this message that I’m sending right now is more important.’

Although I didn’t notice this during Robert’s observations, he touched upon an impression that was pivotal in what the classroom culture and environment communicates to the students within it. In the example he gave during his interview, he highlighted a habitual pattern that
communicates disrespect to his students. Robert noted the importance of always reflecting on his teaching by stating an important shift he has made with his neurodiverse learners over the years:

One of the things that has helped me tremendously and advice I give to all young teachers is to always start with ‘What can I do differently?’ As a teacher, what could I do differently? Because we always look at changing students or we used to look or I used to look at changing students. And it’s really about changing the way we teach. So, I always go back when I reflect on the lessons on good days, but also on bad days, what could I have done different? And that has helped me tremendously.

This advice resonated with me. It is important to note, that as a special educator and former teaching assistant myself, I have the utmost respect for support staff that work in special education. I understand the challenges of being the constant for students in the classroom, with very little breaks for yourself. I made similar mistakes early in my career that I observed support staff make during my observations.

**Conclusion**

In this section, I discussed how participants approached oppressive normativity and celebrated neurodiversity in their classrooms. The first sub-theme discussed how the special education teachers in this study utilized their students’ interests to celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom. The participants incorporated student passions into lessons and assessments to engage their neurodiverse learners. The second sub-theme outlined how the participants discuss autism with their students. I discussed Lindsay’s approach to celebrating neurodiversity by incorporating lessons on successful neurodiverse individuals. The third sub-theme included some of the limitations the participants have when faced with oppressive normativity in the school and
classroom. The special education teachers in this case study identified state testing, educational structure, and support staff as the major limitations. Participants discussed how they train support staff in their classroom to support the celebration of neurodiversity.

Forced normalcy was unfortunately a theme that emerged during my observations and interviews. This theme, highlighted in the next section, was present when some participants utilized behavioral approaches, positive behavior support, planned ignoring, prompting, and teacher language. Similar to the research on autism education, this theme is controversial and provides the groundwork for future research and conversations regarding oppressive normativity in the classroom, which is outlined in Chapter Five.

**Forced Normalcy**

As discussed in Chapter Two, there is ongoing controversy in the autistic community about the most appropriate approach to working with neurodiverse students. There appears to be a binary approach to autism education, siding with either behavioral or developmental models. As a professional working with neurodiverse students, I reject behavioral models and implement developmental and relationship-based models that are more respectful of student diversity. This was a bias I brought into the research study that is important to note. Although all participants had a positive approach to oppressive normativity, there were still factors in the classrooms that focused on compliance and normative assumptions.

In this section, I discuss the last theme, forced normalcy, by highlighting four sub-themes: (a) Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS), (b) planned ignoring, (c) prompting, and (d) teacher language. The first sub-theme is on a behavioral approach, called PBIS, that several participants in this study used in their classroom. The second sub-theme will outline a controversial teaching technique used in special education, called planned ignoring. The
third sub-theme unveils moments when teachers used prompting in a normative fashion. Last, in the fourth sub-theme, I highlight language used by some of the participants that followed a deficit mindset.

**PBIS**

Four of the six of the participants in this study utilized PBIS in their classroom. PBIS is a school-wide system that sets expectations for behavior and rewards students for following through on those expectations (Center on PBIS, 2022). I discussed and observed the PBIS systems with the participants who use them and discovered a few different ways these were implemented.

One way PBIS was implemented was that each classroom created the expectations with students at the beginning of the school year and then rewarded students for following through on these expectations. Students then received points for every time they followed an expectation. Points were then redeemed at the end of the week at a “PBIS Store.” I felt it was positive that students and teachers created the expectations together, rather than the expectations being chosen by the teacher or administration.

For example, in Lindsay’s classroom, one of the expectations was to be flexible. Students in her classroom received rewards based on their ability to be flexible when there were sudden or expected changes to the schedule. She explained, “We really did do it with neurodivergent learners in mind because one of them is being flexible, in terms of that for school rules, because sometimes there’s fire drills, sometimes the schedule changes, your OT [occupational therapist] is absent.” I reflected back on this quote during my data-analysis process and realized that this “rule” that students were expected to follow was setting students up for success outside of their school community. Changes occur often and autistic students struggle with these changes due to
rigid thinking. Therefore, by creating this expectation and teaching students how to cope when there is a change in routine, Lindsay is thoroughly appreciating the needs of her neurodiverse learners and providing them the necessary support.

I believe it is possible to successfully teach students activities of daily living, social-emotional skills, hygiene, and community safety skills without forcing normalcy. For example, there is a difference between what Lindsay is teaching her students and a teacher rewarding students for not stimming, flapping, or vocalizing. These are attributes of an autistic student that assists them in regulation when the world becomes too overwhelming. Although these attributes often make others feel uncomfortable or do not conform to societal norms, it does not mean we should teach students this is wrong. The focus should be on students moving and speaking in a way that settles their body, emotions, and sensory systems, regardless of who is offended or uncomfortable.

Two of the participants are required to follow a school-wide PBIS system that was created by the administration in their building. (I do not use these participants’ names out of respect for them.) It was not clear during my observations whether or not the participants agreed with this approach that they were obliged to follow. Students and teachers did not have input on the expectations and were required to follow them throughout the school year. It was unclear how the expectations were created and what they were based on. Since these systems were school-wide, it was evident that they did not take individual differences into account. With these systems, students received points and could redeem them for prizes.

What also was not clear with this system was how characteristics of autism such as communication breakdowns and sensory perceptual differences were taken into account. It was my assumption that these systems did not take these into account. For example, during my
observations of the two classrooms with school-wide PBIS systems, I noticed that students were not receiving points for putting their head down, calling out, or getting up during the class. It was evident that students were being ridiculed for exhibiting autistic qualities. This was clear evidence of forcing normalcy.

**Planned Ignoring**

During observations on two teachers, I recognized that they used “planned ignoring” when students presented with challenging behavior. Planned ignoring is when a teacher purposefully ignores the behavior of a student to avoid giving attention to the student and to decrease “unwanted behaviors.” There are many issues with this tactic, one being ignoring the student’s communicative intent. Second, the implementation of this strategy is subjective and based on the normative assumptions of the teacher. Planned ignoring is a form of ableism that is preferable for some educators because the goal is for students to conform to the behaviors of their neurotypical peers (Hehir, 2002).

By ignoring neurodiverse students’ intent to communicate, educators can hinder expanding upon their communication and deter them from initiating communication with others. Lindsay agreed with this sentiment when she stated, “I completely disagree with forced compliance, and that’s something that happens way too often. You’re allowed to say ‘no,’” showing that she did not do planned ignoring with her students. Indeed, by forcing our students to comply or ignoring their behavior, we are teaching them that their voice does not matter. Rates of abuse in autistic children is higher in comparison to their neurotypical peers (Dmour et al., 2019). We have to question whether the normative practice of planned ignoring and forcing compliance is a contributing factor. This point is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Prompting

Prompting is used in special education to encourage students to complete a task. Prompting can be in physical, gestural, or verbal form. For example, if teachers want a student to zip up a jacket, a physical prompt would be assisting the student with the zippering skill by placing their hands over his or her hands for guidance through the process. If teachers want to communicate it is time to go to lunch, a gestural prompt could be pointing to a student’s lunchbox. Verbal prompting is simply stating what the expectation is in a full sentence or simple words describing the task.

I observed in a few classes where participants would over-prompt students and not allow them time to process the information being presented to them. The teacher would state the task or expectation repeatedly until the student completed the task. I noticed this response when the teacher would prompt many times without allowing time for the student to process incoming information. This led to students communicating through challenging behaviors, which I interpreted as the student asking for more time.

For example, during one observation, the participant requested that the students take out their math workbooks. When the teacher stated this, one student did not stand up to get the workbook. The teacher then stated this again immediately to the student, who began hitting the desk. This was followed up by the teacher using gestural and verbal prompting again. The student then began engaging in self-injurious behavior. It was clear that the student was communicating not being ready for class or needing something. The teacher continued to prompt the student, which further frustrated the student. I felt strongly that if the teacher waited for the student to be ready, the student would not have engaged in this challenging behavior. I felt there was too much focus on complying with the request, rather than tuning in to what the student was
communicating through the behavior. The participant did not respect this communication and instead intervened with the behavior instead of understanding the intent behind it.

Another factor that contributed to forcing normalcy was the language of the teachers I observed and interviewed. It is important to note that during my data-analysis process, I carefully examined the teachers’ language during their lessons and our interview. I was looking for evidence of their approach to oppressive normativity and potential examples of forcing normalcy. I believe it is imperative to speak about neurodiverse students from a strength-based approach rather than speaking of their deficits. There were a few examples of participants using deficit language, which is discussed in the next section.

**Teacher Language**

In general, language is of the utmost importance when discussing disability, but of increased importance is the way teachers discuss their students or speak to them directly. During a few interviews, teachers discussed their students’ dysregulation using deficit language or words that have an undesirable connotation. Although this negative language is not directly correlated to forced normalcy, it can have an impact on the partnership the teachers strive to create in their classroom.

The following quotes are examples of deficit-based language that I encountered during my interviews with the six special education teachers: “They did it without complaining,” “I’m sure you noticed that they’re not really capable of much on their own,” “Do it the way we learned it,” “Please give them $5.00 for good behavior,” and “Don’t start.” The first two quotes are examples from my teacher interviews. Ironically, both quotes are from the same participant. Although I observed this participant approaching oppressive normativity in a positive light, the way in which she spoke about her students created a negative connotation. The latter three quotes
were from teacher observations. The first quote is an example of a teacher limiting a student to completing a task only one way. The second quote was an example of a teacher exhibiting PBIS and rewarding a student for normative behavior. The third quote was negative language toward a student who was exhibiting challenging behavior.

**Conclusion**

In this section, I discussed the last theme, forced normalcy, by emphasizing four sub-themes: (a) PBIS, (b) planned ignoring, (c) prompting, and (d) teacher language. The first sub-theme was on PBIS, a behavioral approach that several of the participants in this study used in their classroom. The second sub-theme included examples of planned ignoring, a controversial teaching technique used in special education. In the third sub-theme, I discussed moments when teachers used prompting in a normative fashion during my classroom observations. Lastly, the fourth sub-theme highlighted language used by some of the participants that followed a deficit mind frame.

**Closing Thoughts**

This chapter presented the major findings of this qualitative case study that answered the research questions. I discovered three major findings throughout the data-analysis process and one finding that cut across all themes. First, special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse learners perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom from a strength-based and passion-based approach. Second, special education teachers celebrated neurodiversity by using sensory techniques, social support, student differentiation, and student choice. Last, giving students a voice literally and figuratively supported a neurodiverse classroom. This created a partnership in the learning process, an aspect that is imperative for neurodiverse students.
The finding that cut across all themes was flexibility. Special education teachers in this study were flexible in what they taught and how they taught it, to account for student differences. The participants adapted and modified their lessons to meet the diverse needs of the students in their classroom. These findings open doors for future research and provide implications for special education practice, which are discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

This chapter presents a summary of the study and discussion of the findings related to the literature and theoretical framework. I begin with a summary of the study and overview of the prior four chapters of this dissertation. I then review the problem, purpose statement, research questions, and methodology of this qualitative case study. The major findings of this study are then elaborated upon, as well as surprising findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of this study. Last, I provide concluding remarks.

Summary of the Study

In this dissertation, I explored six special education teachers’ approach to oppressive normativity and celebration of neurodiversity through virtual observations of their classroom and semi-structured interviews over Zoom. While much is known about ableism in schools—specifically, that it still exists—the significance of this study was to understand how special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom and adapt/modify their classroom experience for neurodiverse learners. This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of autism education and critical disability theory by considering the perceptions of special education teachers on neurodiversity.

Overview of the Dissertation

I divided this dissertation into five chapters. In Chapter One, I introduced the problem, purpose, and significance of this research study. Additionally, I provided an overview of the methodology, setting, and participants. I concluded the chapter by discussing ethical issues, trustworthiness, and key terms related to this study. In Chapter Two, I provided a review of relevant literature related to the research topic, as well literature connected to the theoretical
framework of critical disability theory. The theoretical framework offered me a lens to understand how the participants approach oppressive normativity in their classroom. In Chapter Three, I detailed the methodology in this qualitative case study by discussing how I obtained participants, collected data, and designed the observation and interview protocols. In Chapter Four, I analyzed the data, provided visual representation of code development, and detailed how the codes were condensed into common themes. I concluded by presenting my findings related to these common themes and the research questions. The next section provides an overview of the problem that led me to the purpose of this research study as well as the research questions.

**Overview of the Problem**

Many of the practices used in special education today validate ableist assumptions created by societal norms (Manalili, 2021). It is imperative that special education teachers discover students’ differences/strengths and implement differentiated classroom strategies, such as asset-based pedagogy, strength-based learning, and strong teacher/student relationships, to provide the most appropriate educational practices for neurodiverse learners (Armstrong, 2012). I mentioned in Chapter Two that special education teachers need to think about their students’ strengths rather than their challenges—a practice used all too often in modern-day special education classrooms (Armstrong, 2012). By studying the perceptions of special education teachers on oppressive normativity and the techniques they use in their classrooms, this study was useful in shifting the narrative from normativity to neurodiversity.

Due to autistic students’ divergence from “typical” thinking and learning, ableism is exhibited by the use of deficit language and practices by professionals (Botha et al., 2021). It is imperative for special education teachers to provide neurodivergent students with educational practices that support their authentic selves and achieve their full academic and social/emotional
potential (Manalili, 2021). The educational system in America holds the highest power in ensuring that neurodiverse students receive the most appropriate and respectful education to meet their needs (Brownlow et al., 2021); yet, many neurodiverse students are forced to comply or camouflage their autistic characteristics.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

While much is known about the importance of creating a safe and comfortable learning environment for neurodiverse students, the purpose of this qualitative, instrumental case study was to discover the connections between special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity in the classroom. As previously mentioned, participants in this study only work in self-contained classrooms; therefore, it was expected that they would be an example for the wider autism education community, due to them working strictly with neurodiverse students. Utilizing critical disability theory, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do special education teachers working with neurodiverse learners perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom?
2. How do special education teachers approach oppressive normativity in their classroom?
3. What techniques do special education teachers use to celebrate neurodiverse students in their classroom?

**Review of the Methodology**

These research questions were answered through a constructivist, critical instrumental case study, collecting data through observations and semi-structured interviews with each participant. This design allowed me to investigate the multiple perspectives of special education
teachers and allowed an in-depth view into their experiences at Shaker Heights, a specialized school for students with disabilities. The sample of participants in this study were purposeful to emphasize the ways special education teachers can celebrate neurodiversity, adapt for differences, and approach oppressive normativity. I accomplished this by purposefully selecting teachers via questionnaire. I sent the questionnaire to all teachers at Shaker Hills through email and probed on their teaching methodology and techniques to determine if they were a good fit for the study. By sifting through their survey responses and determining which participants had a strong understanding of neurodiversity, I acquired six special education teachers to participate in my study.

After several discussions with the district representative of Shaker Hills, surveys were sent to potential participants in February 2021. I determined the six participants in early March 2021. The participant observations and interviews occurred from March to July 2021. During each observation, I took field notes based on my observation protocol to assist in answering the research questions. Additionally, each interview was recorded and transcribed utilizing Rev.com 24 hours after the interview was completed. I analyzed the data simultaneously and continuously during the data-collection process, finding commonalities through the various data points to answer the research questions.

**Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I discuss the major findings in this study. I then relate the findings to the literature included in Chapter Two. I discuss how my study contributed to the theoretical framework of critical disability theory. My first finding answered the first research question. Special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse learners do not perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom because the acceptance of neurodiversity is the
standard. Yet, I found evidence of both oppressive normativity and the celebration of neurodiversity. Instances where teachers did not perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom could highlight their natural inclination to adapt for neurodiverse students. Consequently, this finding could be disadvantageous by highlighting that special education teachers need to heighten their awareness of oppressive practices in their classroom.

The second finding answered the second and third research question. Special education teachers celebrated neurodiversity and approached oppressive normativity by using sensory techniques, social support, student differentiation, and providing students with choices for learning. Additionally, special education teachers approach oppressive normativity by giving their students a voice, literally and figuratively. This culture is what I have termed neurodiverse communication empowerment, a pedagogical strategy that serves to create a partnership in the learning process. It is a practice that is imperative for neurodiverse students to feel respected and accepted in their educational environment. These findings open doors for future research, which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Findings Related to the Literature

The three major themes in this study reflected special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity through a critical disability theory lens. The participants exhibited and shared their perceptions through honest, raw, and humanistic approaches that were student centered and celebratory of neurodiversity and human differences. The findings of this study can lead to further development of appropriate special education practice, neurodiverse communication empowerment, by highlighting student voice and strengths, illuminating the understanding of oppressive normativity, and developing strong teacher-student relationships with autistic students.
Student Voice and Strengths

As stated in Chapter Two, a common theme in the literature included the importance of listening to the voices, literal and/or figurative, of neurodiverse students (Armstrong, 2012; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2020; Kapp et al., 2019). There was a gap in the literature, as several studies spoke to the importance of listening to student voices, but none had discovered whether special education teachers fulfilled this notion. My study confirmed that special education teachers use student voice and choice as a means of celebrating neurodiversity in their classroom. A common theme among the participants in my study was their innate ability to honor students’ voices, listen to their concerns, and address them respectfully. Additionally, participants who worked with non-speaking autistic students honored their intent to communicate through various modes, such as vocalizations, gestures, or sign language.

Brownlow et al. (2021) found that autistic students do not feel as though they have a say in their education and that decisions around their education are made by their teacher without direct input from them. In my study, I found that several special education teachers took their students’ opinions into account when designing their education. For example, Robert and Lindsay asked their students pertinent questions that created an educational and relational partnership. The opinions and feelings of students in their classrooms held weight to the instructional decisions that were made by the teachers.

The main findings from Brownlow et al.’s (2021) research on an inclusive approach to autism education were aligned with the practices I observed of the special education teachers in my study. Their findings included the importance of teachers creating a safe environment that facilitates conversations, understanding students’ needs, offering meaningful choices to students, and presuming student competence. Similarly, Kapp et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of
special education teachers understanding autistic characteristics such as scripting, stimming, pacing, and hand flapping. Kapp et al. noted that self-stimulatory behavior is crucial to the overall regulation of autistic individuals and deterring them from this could be detrimental to their well-being. I found that special education teachers in my study provided appropriate outlets for students to engage in self-regulating behaviors such as stimming, bouncing, pacing, and vocalizing. Special education teachers in my study were aware and accepting of the sensory needs of their students. For example, Lindsay noted that her students are not redirected from these behaviors because this is what their body needs to remain regulated and calm. Similarly, Jennifer discovered that her students’ vocalizations were a means of regulation and intent to communicate. Most participants had a solid understanding of their students’ sensory needs and adapted their environment to allow for this, rather than suppressing their autistic qualities.

**Oppressive Normativity**

When the participants in my study were questioned on how they approach oppressive normativity and avoid forced normalcy in their classroom, several of the teachers appeared to be stunned by the question. It appeared this astonishment came from questioning why they would force their students to be anything other than who they are as human beings. This was an interesting finding, given the research describing students’ negative experiences in schools related to feeling misunderstood based on their neurodiversity (Brownlow et al., 2021).

Much of this research on neurodiverse students has occurred in mainstream educational settings. Inversely, my study was purposefully designed to inquire from special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse students in a special education school district. I selected this type of school environment because of the premise that the special education teachers working in this setting would set the standard for inclusive, mainstream educational
environments, and could provide meaningful insight into working with neurodiverse students. For the most part, the six participants in this study did not focus on “changing” who their students were by fitting them into the status quo of a neurotypical student. This was evidenced by the participants’ innate ability to adapt and modify curriculum for the various learners within their class. Teachers did this by being flexible with their lesson plans, activities, and timeline. Although there were positive attributes in each participant’s classroom, some participants did exhibit ableism by utilizing normalizing techniques with their students.

Hughes (2016) spoke to the importance of a neurodiverse perspective in the classroom. By shifting to a neurodiversity perspective, educators celebrate the uniqueness in how autistic students relate, communicate, and process the world around them (Breslow, 2020). It was clear in my study that the six teachers shared this neurodiverse perspective, which likely has made a positive impact on their students’ overall well-being. There is much work to be done within the autistic community to shift to the neurodiversity perspective.

There is an agenda of normalization in society and this is a lived experience for autistic students in an ableist society (Milton, 2018). This lived experience often begins in schools across America (Vishwanath, 2019), because of our nation’s discomfort with human differences of any sort. Students on the spectrum are often taught in school to camouflage their characteristics of autism and assimilate with their neurotypical peers (Jorgenson et al., 2020).

What I observed in my participants’ classrooms was not only an educational environment that was accepting and promoting of their student’s differences, but also one that was adapted and modified to support their unique learning needs through differentiating content, presuming competence, and being flexible.
Neurodiverse teacher methods. Schuck et al. (2021) affirmed that traditional autism interventions and teaching methods are at odds with the neurodiversity movement. Prizant and Fields-Meyer (2015) noted that, often, the goal of professionals is to extinguish autistic behaviors or characteristics without taking the time to understand the meaning behind them. The participants in my study were more aligned with the neurodiversity movement and saw student differences as a typical human variation. The techniques and knowledge of neurodiversity set the participants in my study apart from other special educators who are still relying on behavioral practices.

As discussed in Chapter Four, special education teachers in my study understood the importance of providing a multi-sensory approach to learning by providing visuals, opportunities for hands-on learning, and tactile experiences, and most importantly, adapting lessons to meet each student’s diverse individual needs to learn most effectively. The participants supplemented their teaching with visual representations of the content to support students who needed multiple modalities to access content. Additionally, the participants provided tactile cues to support lessons for students who needed to experience curriculum through a hands-on approach. The special education teachers in this study also differentiated lessons based on their students’ learning style, as evidenced by creating individualized lessons to meet their students’ sensory and social/emotional needs.

In Chapter Two, I argued that educators who follow ideals of ableism are setting autistic students up for failure by assimilating them to their neurotypical peers. When educators view autism education through a binary (normal versus typical) lens, they lose sight of the beauty in student variation. I discovered that the participants’ teaching environments within a special education school contributed to their lack of concern with forcing normalcy. All students at
Shaker Hills were neurodiverse; therefore, the participants did not compare their students to their same-aged peers but rather viewed them as individuals who were on their own educational trajectory. Future research should understand this phenomenon deeper by questioning teachers who work in mainstream settings on ableist ideals.

**Relationships**

The special education teachers in my study placed emphasis on the relationships they had with students in their care. They understood that education is a partnership and their students were more engaged when they became invested in their strengths and passions. Brownlow et al. (2021) noted, “A core facilitator for enabling positive educational experiences was the establishment of positive relationships and respectful communication between teachers and students.” All of the participants spoke to the importance of developing relationships with their neurodiverse students.

Findings from Roorda et al. (2021) suggested that taking the time to invest in strong student-centered relationships improves overall learning engagement for autistic students. Similarly, all six teachers in my study provided opportunities for students to learn through the relationships they shared with staff in the classroom. Both Robert and Lindsay created classroom expectations in conjunction with their students. They did this by listening to what was important to their students, rather than dictating the expectations for them. This allowed students to feel respected and as though the environment was equitable between teacher and student.

Many of the participants utilized those relationships as a tool to educating their students through strengths, humor, and passions, and this was further developed through my study when observing the students interact with an environment that fostered their interests. Jennifer and her classroom staff took time out of each day to simply spend time together and foster an
encouraging learning environment. Although Jennifer did not specifically mention the Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based (DIR®) Model, she used this framework to build a healthy educational foundation for her students. I discuss the DIR Model and an additional model for respectful autism education practice in the Implications for Practice section below.

**Contribution to Critical Disability Theory**

Critical disability theory was used in this study to investigate special education teachers’ approach to oppressive normativity. Typically, special education practice validates ableist assumptions by viewing a student’s disability as binary (Manalili, 2021). As discussed in Chapter Two, critical disability theory provides special education teachers an opportunity to understand how their students’ disability positively or negatively interacts with the classroom environment they design. It was evident during my data collection and analysis how special education teachers adapt their practice to create an environment that promotes positive interactions with neurodiverse students. I went into this study wondering if I would find evidence of normative assimilation and/or celebration of neurodiversity through critical disability theory. What I found was evidence of both through observations and interviews with the participants. Special education teachers, whether intentionally or unintentionally, do indeed practice ableism. Critical disability theory provided me with an opportunity to begin deconstructing the binary of “abled and disabled” in the context of autism education, while also allowing me to explore the origins of oppressive practices that influence autistic student experiences in education.

The assimilation of neurodiverse students was evidenced in my study by negative teacher language and the use of outdated behavioral modification practices that seek to alter students’ individualized characteristics. Although this assimilation did exist, the celebration of
neurodiversity was more prevalent in my findings. This was evidenced through positive relationships and individualized adaptation to the learning environment. I yearn for the continuous embrace of neurodiversity in educational practices for the benefit of autistic students globally. Since I did find evidence of forcing normalcy and oppressive normativity even in a special education school, I question what the learning environment in inclusion or mainstream classrooms is like for autistic students, which is an area for future research.

When special education teachers embrace neurodiversity, they value the student, the disability, and the interaction between both in education. This embrace of student differences and autistic qualities/characteristics helps to dismantle ableism in educational environments by obstructing normative thinking and behavior. It is imperative that the practice of valuing the interaction between students and their disability becomes a habit in special education, which can be done by involving autistic students in conversations about their educational environment. Special education teachers should consistently check in with their autistic learners to understand what attributes of their teaching are constructive and what factors are challenging. This check-in can occur by having conversations with students who are able to advocate for themselves.

Special education teachers should teach autistic students self-advocacy skills starting in elementary school, so they can ensure their educational experience remains a partnership. I recommend utilizing the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction, defined in Chapter One, as a starting point. These conversations should occur with multiple modalities of presentation, such as verbal, visual, and tactile, to ensure that individual student differences are accounted for. For students who are non-speaking, or who struggle to advocate for themselves, special education teachers can observe their students’ body language to determine whether their practices are conducive to a neurodiverse environment. Teachers can record their lessons and
then review the recording to observe their students’ reaction to the environment they have provided.

It is important to note that autistic students are not the only disability population facing oppressive practices in their educational environment. Autism received more attention in my study due to my own personal and professional connection. The teachers in my study had either a lack of perception of oppressive practices in their classroom, or the celebration of neurodiversity was the norm. Oppressive practices may be more outward where disability is more visible (e.g., physical disabilities) than autism. This is an area for further research in the field of special education. The findings of this study not only apply to special educators working with autistic students but also to any student in special education.

**Surprising Findings**

The surprising findings include a lack of feedback from neurodiverse organizations or individuals and only one participant with a family member or friend on the spectrum. I questioned the participants on their approach to oppressive normativity and, naturally, all participants discussed the techniques they use as special education teachers. Only one participant discussed how she seeks feedback from neurodiverse organizations or individuals to improve her practice. Consequently, this same participant identified as neurodiverse herself, which may have contributed to this finding. I was surprised to learn that more teachers did not seek input in the same way to inform their teaching of neurodiverse students, as this method is heavily researched in the autistic community.

Last, in my initial survey, I asked whether the participants had a friend or family member on the spectrum. Due to the growing numbers of autism diagnosis in this country, I assumed many of the participants would have someone close to them on the spectrum. I was surprised to
find that only one of the participants had a family member on the spectrum. Given my positionality and the strong connection this had on why I went into the field of special education, I was amazed that most of the participants in my study did not share this same position.

**Implications for Practice**

My findings warrant the following implications for special education practice. First, special education administrators should increase training in developmental, relationship-based, strength-based, and passion-based pedagogy for special education teachers working with neurodiverse students as well as for pre-service teachers in college. Second, special education teachers should consistently check in with their neurodiverse students to receive feedback on what changes can be made to their learning environment. This implication is a unique contribution of my work and recommendation for special education teachers in all settings. Mainstream or inclusion teachers should observe in strictly neurodiverse classrooms to further understand how to support autistic learners and approach oppressive normativity in a respectful way. Last, White special education teachers should increase their awareness and understanding of the relationship between neurodiversity and racial diversity.

**Teacher Training**

The shift in special education to a neurodiversity perspective can occur if teachers are trained in several techniques and interventions such as DIR®/Floortime and Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS). Since special education teachers are required to follow the methodology proposed by their administration and school district, this change to appropriate school-based autism interventions needs to occur at that level. Administrators in special education need to familiarize themselves with additional
methodologies other than ABA, and make the decision about the most appropriate methodology for their teachers and students.

There is a growing number of autism advocates and diagnosed individuals who are speaking up about their negative experiences with ABA. Their voices must be heard so the next generation of students can avoid this detrimental educational experience. Administrators can do this by training their teachers on how to shift to a neurodiversity paradigm. Special education administrators should increase training in developmental, relationship-based, strength-based, and passion-based pedagogy for special education teachers. Examples of these educational approaches include DIR, developed by Dr. Stanley Greenspan, and the SCERTS Model, developed by Barry Prizant. DIR® focuses on building foundations for social, emotional, and intellectual abilities rather than focusing on a student’s behaviors (Greenspan & Wieder, 2008). The SCERTS Model focuses on the teamwork between families, educators, and clinicians to support autistic students in communication, learning, and relationship development (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2015).

Neurodiverse Student Voices

Students on the spectrum have been stating that behavioral practices have a negative impact on their overall well-being (Kupferstein, 2018). However, professionals are still recommending behavioral interventions to parents of autistic children (Sandbank et al., 2021). Additionally, families with a child on the spectrum often turn to ABA because there is limited information available informing them of alternative interventions (Sandbank et al., 2021). Families are often desperate to help their child and choose ABA as a therapy. Although the autism community has progressed toward more respectful and accepting practices, there is a long road ahead to ensure that neurodiverse students do not experience oppressive normativity.
One way we can make progress is for teachers to listen to the students’ neurodiverse voices. Our students tell us everything we need to know as professionals, even if they do not say anything at all. Special education teachers need to listen to their students’ voices, ask them questions, and then create change based on the feedback they provide regarding their education by creating a culture of neurodiverse communication empowerment. If a neurodiverse student is not able to tell their teacher directly what they need, professionals then need to form strong relationships to understand their body language and vocalizations as a means of appropriate feedback. Our neurodiverse students need to feel accepted, respected, and celebrated for every characteristic they exude, regardless of whether it fits the status quo or makes others feel uncomfortable.

The Neurodiversity Teacher

There are many takeaways from what I observed about the six participant teachers’ practice for other professionals seeking to combat oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom. It is my belief that the teachers in my study were well versed in the celebration of neurodiversity because they teach in specialized schools strictly for neurodiverse students. This setting is considered the “most restrictive environment” for students in special education because of the high-level support students receive. I found that they did not compare students’ academic, social, or behavioral progress because there were no “normalized” students present. This may not be the case in mainstream or inclusive settings, which is considered the “least restrictive environment.” Cathy discussed how the focus in special education is progressing students to the least restrictive environment, but what is not clear is how neurodiverse students are celebrated in this type of environment.
Special education or inclusion teachers working in mainstream environments should observe teachers working in strictly neurodiverse environments to acquire techniques on approaching oppressive normativity. By immersing themselves in learning environments that are respectful to autistic students, teachers can learn how to adapt their practice for students in their care. This could consequently create more positive education experiences for neurodiverse students overall. Since a focus in special education is moving students from most restrictive to least restrictive environments, teachers in both settings need to be prepared to approach oppressive practices in a respectful fashion.

A common theme in my study was flexibility among the participants. This flexibility was evidenced through adapting lessons, changing the pace of instruction, providing breaks, and having multiple plans in the event a student needed differentiation: “Reflectivity is also essential in special education, since it is necessary to analyze, plan activities, and deal constructively with uncertainty and unpredictability in order to reformulate the action” (Fernandes et al., 2021, p. 9). It is my belief that education administrators can begin to implement policy in their schools to allow flexibility for teachers in the areas of curriculum development and pace of instruction, working with neurodiverse learners so they receive the most appropriate educational experience.

Neurodiversity/Racial Diversity

White special education teachers should increase their awareness and understanding of the relationship between neurodiversity and racial diversity. As previously mentioned, all participants in my study were White. The racial makeup of my participants’ classrooms was not only neurodiverse but also racially diverse. During my interviews with participants, they did not discuss the intersection between disability and race, implying that although they may be able to approach oppressive normativity respectfully, they might not be able to understand racial
diversity in their classroom. Research on teachers of color could shed light on intersectionality research related to race and disability.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, special education teachers who work strictly with neurodiverse learners do not perceive oppressive normativity in their classroom because the acceptance of neurodiversity is the standard. What requires further development is whether this facet is due to special education teachers’ innate ability to adapt for neurodiverse students or their need to heighten their awareness of oppressive practices in their classroom. Additionally, future research could focus on mainstream or inclusion classrooms versus special education classrooms to understand if the least restrictive environment is prepared to approach oppressive normativity and celebrate neurodiversity.

My study utilized a case study design to foster understandings into the issue of oppressive normativity in special education that may represent other similar cases (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Future studies could use a phenomenology or ethnography design to further develop my findings. A phenomenology design would help to apprehend the essence of neurodiverse students’ experience in their classroom. An ethnography design would assist in further understanding the culture of a neurodiverse classroom setting.

The research on the importance of hearing autistic voices is plentiful. I recommend more studies specifically dedicated to how autistic students interpret their learning environments. These studies should answer the following questions: (a) What aspects make autistic students feel supported? (b) What aspects make them feel forced to comply with normative characteristics? (c) What do autistic students need from their special education teacher to feel successful? These questions should be answered by directly asking autistic students through multiple modalities
such as direct conversation, social stories, visuals, or augmented/alternative communication to account for various modes of communication.

The intersection between the neurodiversity paradigm and the widely used and outdated intervention, ABA, is ongoing. There are countless studies identifying that ABA has been a traumatic experience for autistic students, yet it is still the most commonly researched autism intervention. Johnson (2021) stated that neurodiversity must be considered in any autism intervention. PBIS is a form of ABA that was used by several participants in my study. Much like the controversy surrounding autism intervention in general, the same applies to the professional feelings of PBIS and the impact it has on neurodiverse students. I argue that PBIS focuses on extrinsic motivation, rather than motivating students to learn through their strengths, passions, and relationships with their teacher. Further development on the impact of PBIS systems on neurodiverse students is needed. More specifically, future studies should focus on how schools are defining “positive behavior” and if students are involved in the decision-making process.

As mentioned previously, the participants in my study were not racially diverse (all participants were White). A study with special education teachers of color could assist in understanding how race and disability intersect and how culturally sustaining pedagogy could be integrated in a neurodiverse classroom. Additionally, my study took place in a suburban environment. An additional study using a similar design in a rural or urban environment is necessary to understand the differences in autism education across school locations. Last, I recommend completing a study on support staff in a neurodiverse classroom to further understand how to appropriately train them to engage with neurodiverse learners.
Limitations

There are two limitations that have been identified in this study. First, all special education teachers in this study identified as White. The student bodies they taught were not only neurodiverse but also racially diverse. Therefore, the intersectionality of race and disability is imperative for the students of my participants. The participants in my study did not discuss race during my interviews, which could be problematic when adapting and modifying for various learners. As mentioned in the previous section, future research should be conducted with teachers of color.

The second limitation was my inability to conduct classroom observations in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was not able to fully immerse myself in the classroom environment and probably missed subtle signs of oppressive normativity or the celebration of neurodiversity during these observations. Additionally, I was not able to see the students and had to rely on listening intently to the environment while writing my field notes. I decreased this limitation by asking teachers to send photographs of the classroom and by asking them to move the computer camera around the classroom when students were not present.

Conclusion

Special education teachers are faced daily with approaching oppressive normativity and/or celebrating neurodiversity. The special education teachers in my study understood the imperative nature of creating a neurodiverse classroom. Autistic students rely on their teachers to ensure their school-aged years set the groundwork for a lifetime of appreciation and acceptance of their disability. It is the responsibility of a teacher to create a classroom that allows students to “be who they are” and is friendly of differences of any kind, especially sensory, communicative, social, and emotional ones. This dissertation did not seek to solve all of the ongoing challenges.
for autistic students; however, it sought to shed light on the importance of celebrating neurodiversity, and to never, ever attempt to change students because of their disability.
References


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2017.01.012


https://autismspectrumnews.org/neurodiversity-the-new-normal/


https://www.concordia.ca/content/concordia/en/artsci/cissc/working-groups/archives/critical-disability-studies.html


https://cdrnys.org/blog/uncategorized/ableism/


https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.02.01.5


Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

1000 Hempstead Ave., PO Box 5002, Rockville Center, NY 11571-5002
www.molloy.edu

Kathleen Maurer Smith, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate Academic Affairs
T: 516.323.3801
F: 516.323.3398
E: ksmith@molloy.edu

DATE: February 9, 2021
TO: Caitlin Sweetapple, MS
FROM: Molloy College IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [1696744-1] Through a critical disability theory lens: Discovering special education teachers’ perceptions of oppressive normativity and their practice of celebrating neurodiversity
REFERENCE #: New Project
SUBMISSION TYPE: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: February 9, 2021
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 01

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy College IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. However, exempt research activities are subject to the same human subject protections and ethical standards as outlined in the Belmont Report.

ONLY THOSE WHO SIGNED CONSENT FORM MAY BE VIDEOTAPED, NOT STUDENTS.

This acknowledgement expires within three years- unless there is a change to the protocol.

Though this protocol does not require annual IRB review, the IRB requires an annual report of your exempt protocol ( Expedited and Exempt Research Protocol Annual Report Form) which is available on the IRB webpage.

If there is a proposed change to the protocol, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy College IRB of any requested changes before implementation. A change in the research may change the project from EXEMPT status and requires prior communication with the IRB.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckardt@molloy.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,
Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy College Institutional Review Board

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Molloy College IRB's records.
APPENDIX B

SAMPLING QUESTIONNAIRE

Research Study Questionnaire
The following questionnaire will be used to determine participants in my research study. This qualitative study will examine how special education teachers’ beliefs and practices promote neurodiversity in the classroom. This questionnaire will take about five minutes to complete. If you are interested in participating in this study, please leave your email address at the end of this questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

1. Please type your name below.

2. How many years of special education teaching experience do you have?
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - 1-2
   - 3-4
   - 5+

3. What content area and grade level is your certification in?

4. Which grade level do you teach?
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - Elementary
   - Middle
   - Secondary
   - K-12
5. Are you teaching within your certification?
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Other: ___

6. Are you tenured?
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

7. What is your classroom student to staff ratio?
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - [ ] 6:1:1
   - [ ] 8:1:1
   - [ ] 12:1:1
   - [ ] Other: ___

8. Why are you teaching at your current school?
   
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
   ____________________________
9. Which methodologies do you use in your classroom?

Check all that apply.

☐ Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)
☐ Developmental Individual Differences Relationship-based Model (DIR)
☐ Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS)
☐ Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH)
☐ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
☐ Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)
Other:  

10. Which methodologies have you received formal training in?

Check all that apply.

☐ Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)
☐ Developmental Individual Differences Relationship-based Model (DIR)
☐ Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS)
☐ Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH)
☐ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
☐ Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)
Other:  

11. Which training methodologies did you receive training at your current work placement?

Check all that apply.

☐ Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)
☐ Developmental Individual Differences Relationship-based Model (DIR)
☐ Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support (SCERTS)
☐ Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH)
☐ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
☐ Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)
Other:  
12. Do you have a close friend or family member with autism?
   
   Mark only one oval.
   
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

13. How do you define neurodiversity?

14. Thank you for your time. If you are interested in participating in this study, please type your email address below.

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms
APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

The researcher will follow the below protocol to observe a special education class and will take field notes on the following:

1. Setting
   a. Sketch of the environment
      i. How is the classroom set-up for each student?
   b. Who is being observed? What roles do they play?
      i. Where are teachers/paraprofessionals in relation to students?
   c. How many participants?
      i. What is the staff/student ratio?

2. Tone
   a. Teacher tone and body language throughout lesson
      i. Does the teacher move around or re-position themselves?
      ii. Does teacher tone change throughout lesson? In relation to what?
   b. Student body language
      i. How do students present at the beginning, middle and end of the lesson?
      ii. Are students sedentary or moving during lesson?
      iii. What supports are available to them throughout the lesson? (e.g. movement breaks, sensory tools, headphones, technology, etc.)
   c. Paraprofessional tone and body language
      i. How are support staff engaging with students?
      ii. Are support staff supporting sensory needs as well as academic needs?
3. Neurodiversity

   a. Attention to strengths and skills of students
   b. Teacher reaction to behavior
   c. Adaptations in lesson for specific learners
   d. Signs of oppressive normativity
      i. Normalized behavioral interventions (e.g. planned ignoring, discrete trial training, script fading procedures, shaping, etc.)
      ii. Language (e.g. over prompting, forced verbal acknowledgement, reinforcement for “normalized” skills versus natural skills, etc.)
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to observe your class. Today, we are going to reflect on teaching neurodiverse learners, your learning environment and teaching philosophy, constraints neurodiverse learners may face and how you as a special education teacher assist in combating those constraints.

Learning Environment/Teaching Philosophy

1. How would you describe the learning environment for neurodiverse learners in your classroom?
   Probe: What would you change about the environment?

2. Picture you are a neurodiverse learner in your classroom, what is that experience like for you?
   Probe: What about the environment is challenging for you?
   Probe: What about the environment is successful for you?
   Probe: How is the environment adapted to meet your diverse needs?

3. How would you describe your teaching philosophy with concern for neurodiverse learners?
   Probe: What methodology you most align with? Why?
   Probe: ABA, DIR, UDL, SCERTS ®, SDLMI…

Oppressive Normativity

4. What techniques do you use in the classroom with respect to student differences?
   Probe: Sensory, communication, behavioral…

5. What constraints, if any, do neurodiverse learners have in your classroom?
   Probe: Describe examples of constraints…social, environmental, sensory-related, etc.
   Probe: How do you combat those constraints?

6. How do you avoid forcing normalcy in your classroom?
   Probe: What administrative constraints do you face?
   Probe: How do you utilize neurodiverse learner’s strengths and skills into your teaching?
   Probe: What techniques do you use to celebrate neurodiversity?
   Probe: What advice would you give a teacher struggling to celebrate neurodiversity in their classroom?
Observation

7. Thank you for allowing me to observe you and your students on (date). It was such a pleasure. While observing, I wrote down a few questions related to my research study based on my observations.
   Pre-determined questions to probe based on classroom observation.
   a. Examples: Teacher reaction to student behavior, utilizing a student’s strength in a lesson, etc.

Grand Tour Question

8. If you could communicate one affirmation to your neurodiverse learners, what would you say?
   Probe: Why is that important to you?
   Probe: Why is that important to your students?