I Do, You Do, We Do: Co-Teachers’ Perspectives of Self-Determination for Students with Dis/abilities

Jenna Theofield

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I Do, You Do, We Do:

Co-Teachers’ Perspectives of Self-Determination for Students with Dis/abilities

Jenna Theofield

Submitted for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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The dissertation of Jenna Marie Theofield entitled: “I Do, You Do, We Do: Co-Teachers’ Perspectives of Self-Determination for Students with Dis/Abilities” 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:

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of four individuals who have been instrumental in shaping my character and inspiring my academic journey. Mary Ann Graves, William Graves, Patricia Theofield, and Robert Theofield—my beloved grandparents—have left an indelible mark on my life, challenging me to constantly strive toward my aspirations. Their unwavering support and encouragement have been pivotal in my pursuit of a doctorate in education.

It was Grandma Mary who inspired me to embark on this path during a conversation about my perceived inadequacies. She recognized my passion for education and urged me to pursue and apply to Molloy’s Ed.D. program as a means of fulfilling my childhood dream of becoming a doctor. I am eternally grateful to my four angels for their unconditional belief in me and for their profound impact on my life. Their legacies continue to live on through me, and for that, I am forever thankful.
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Abstract

Self-determination plays a vital role in the educational journey of students with a dis/ability. However, opportunities to cultivate self-determining skills for elementary students with dis/abilities in an inclusive co-taught classroom are limited. This can be attributed to the intersectionality of ableism and ageism, two oppressive societal constructs that elementary co-teachers may consciously or subconsciously hold. Since the inception of educating students with dis/abilities in their least restrictive environments, co-teaching classrooms have been deemed as the most appropriate setting for many students considering the continuum of special education services. The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary co-teaching teams perceive the experiences and capabilities of students with dis/abilities in their classroom. A qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenology of practice approach was used for this research. The study used self-determination theory and critical disability theory frameworks. Data included individual semi-structured interview, a co-taught lesson plan artifact, and a semi-structured interview of a co-teaching team. An inductive, qualitative thematic analysis produced four themes. The themes were that educators’ mindsets toward co-teaching impacted perceptions of students with dis/abilities, inclusion considerations for students with dis/abilities were (subconsciously) ableist, self-determination development and acquisition were contingent on student age, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was an underutilized framework for instruction. Implementing co-teaching approaches that embody the utilization of UDL strategies can provide optimal, inclusive educational experiences for students with dis/abilities that prioritize the development of self-determination skills. Limitations and recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords: Ableism, Ageism, Co-teaching, Dis/ability, Self-Determination, Special Education
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Chapter 1

Introduction

First, there needs to be a recognition that education plays a central role in the integration of disabled people in all aspects of society both by giving children the education they need to complete and by demonstrating to nondisabled children that disability is a natural aspect of life. (Hehir, 2018, p. 517)

For students marginalized due to their ability, education serves two important functions: provides the necessary skills and knowledge to participate fully in society and helps challenge the stereotypes and misconceptions about disability that are held by non-disabled individuals. Despite the clear benefits of inclusive education, many individuals with disabilities continue to experience segregation and discrimination in educational settings (National Council on Disability, 2021). Inclusive practices attempt to meet the needs of students with disabilities when intending to create a just education system. Co-teaching refers to an inclusive model of special education services. Within this model, a special education teacher and general education teacher collaborate and share professional responsibilities equally to meet the needs of diverse learners in the classroom (Friend, 2008; Karten & Murawski, 2020; Villa et al., 2004). Through personal experience as a co-teacher, the emergence of trends rooted in ableist ideas causes us to treat students with disabilities as different. Whether this is a conscious or subconscious choice by students, parents, and perhaps even teachers, these differences are worth noting, as they may be hindering the shift toward an education system that is truly just.

Observation and experience allow for the generation of a hypothesis rooted in blunt oppressive structures and practices aligned with the low trajectory and history of individuals with disabilities. Presently in schools, a medical lens of disability is dominant. This medical lens often
identifies a student with disabilities as deficient and less worthy (Iannacci, 2018; Nelson et al., 2020). This all-too dominant medical lens determines that an individual with a disability is “inherently flawed, broken, deficient, and in need of ‘fixing’” (Iannacci, 2018, p. ix).

Some educators might argue that co-teaching services are a way to “level the playing field” and provide students with disabilities scaffolds and smaller teacher-to-student ratios to access a holistic educational experience that is equal, equitable, and ultimately, just. It is critical to synthesize and personally work through definitions of these often-heard, sometimes legal, strongly debated, politically charged, socially relevant, and possibly misused terms: equality, equity, and just. Equality is when two things are the same or have the same value (Gardner, 2019). For instance, a student with a learning disability reading significantly below grade level is administered the same math test as their general-education peer. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful and therefore is not the same. The idea of equity does not assume that everyone starts in the same place and provides individuals with the tools they may need to succeed (Gardner, 2019). If we shift our minds back to the example involving a math test, the student with a learning disability would have the test read aloud to ensure equity. Seems fair, but is this what is just?

When thinking how education can be more inclusive of all students, it is important to interpret the necessity of a just system.

Justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many. (Rawls, 1971, p. 3)

In scrutinizing what is just, educators can provide equal access to tools and opportunities. Rawls’ (1971) theory of justice can serve as a lens to revise and analyze our present system of education
innovatively so that it is just for all students. Inequities can be seen even in elementary co-taught classrooms. These inequities and a need to cultivate a just environment for all students drive the need to research and unpack potential phenomena.

Justice is a right of all students. This dissertation study attempts to understand how ableist and ageist viewpoints impact students at the elementary age, creating an egalitarian environment within the school system. More specifically, a better understanding of how elementary co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with disabilities in their classrooms is interpreted. In doing so, educational professionals can better understand how to ensure a just education for all students, including those with disabilities.

Pioneers in disability studies challenge dominant discourse beginning with the word disability itself. Connor et al. (2016) reinvented and utilized the term dis/ability, which is used throughout this study, unless referring to the unique work of another scholar through direct quotations or paraphrasing where disability was used. The message of dis/ability is twofold: to allow an individual to be acknowledged not by just what they cannot do but also by what they are capable of, and to disrupt preconceived notions, biases, and stereotypes upheld by society (Connor et al., 2016). This language shifts conceptualizations and understandings surrounding dis/ability from deficit-based to asset-based thinking. By highlighting the strengths of all students, teachers can cultivate a learning environment conducive to the development of students’ self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-awareness, all components of self-determination, and arguably a just school environment. The opportunities to cultivate self-determining skills of students with dis/abilities can be interpreted through co-teachers’ experiences, attitudes, and practice.
Statement of the Problem

It is vital that students with dis/abilities have opportunities to cultivate self-determining skills (Field et al., 1998; Thoma & Getzel, 2005; Wehmeyer & Powers, 2007). Field et al. (1998) defined self-determination as follows:

...a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations, together with a belief of oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (p. 2)

Opportunities for students to develop self-awareness, self-advocacy, and choice need to be fostered during elementary years (Luckner & Becker, 2013; Wehmeyer, 2002). Components of self-determination, including problem solving and goal setting, can be explicitly taught in early elementary years (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Many students at the elementary age are not provided with opportunities to cultivate self-determination skills due to conscious or subconscious viewpoints held by educators. These educator perspectives can be deemed as “detrimental to these students and also is detrimental to the perceptions of non-exceptional students about life in the full society” (Nelson et al., 2020).

Overwhelmingly in history, disabilities have been understood as an impairment, deficit, or disorder (Iannacci, 2018; Ladau, 2021). An individual model of disability identifies disability as a “problem” often rooted in the medicalization of an individual and dominant discourse rooted in negative stigmas and connotations. The social model of disability challenges the dominant discourse suggesting that individuals with dis/abilities are dis/abled by societal constructs, not by
their impairment or difference (Oliver, 1996). The social model suggests that beliefs surrounding dis/ability are a construct of our society and that the discourse rooted in ableist language surrounding individuals with dis/abilities needs to be challenged (Ladau, 2021; Oliver, 1996). The culture of our society, along with these detrimental beliefs, are often transferred into the schooling system, as students with dis/abilities are often oppressed due to ableist thinking. Educational professionals must recognize the dire need to shift away from deficit thinking toward asset thinking (Iannacci, 2018; Olmstead et al., 2019) and tap into student strengths (Karten & Murawski, 2020). Students need to be praised for their strengths, rather than defined by weaknesses.

The present structure of education must be reconsidered, as this traditional form of schooling does not meet the needs of diverse learners, including students with dis/abilities. Federal legislation states that students with dis/abilities should have access to high rigor and the general-education curriculum, when “appropriate” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Best practices are rooted in the implementation of lessons that are scaffolded and include a variety of different modalities and assessments modified to demonstrate individual mastery of the content. Instructional choices are within a student’s zone of proximal development. Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development refers to the difference between a child’s current level of development and the level at which they are able to perform tasks with the help of a more skilled partner or teacher. This concept highlights the important role of interaction and support in the development of new skills and knowledge. However, students with disabilities have been virtually ignored (ghosts), respected but not integrated (guests), or cosseted and pampered (pets) in school (Iannacci, 2018). The schooling
system must do a better job including and challenging students with dis/abilities according to their zone of proximal development.

The infamous court case, Pennsylvania *Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971), secured a quality education for all children. Analyzing early laws as such, one may notice a heavy reliance on the “concept of equality that meant equal access to different resources; children attended separate special education classes and schools” (Nelson et al., 2020, p. 356). Separation is rooted in ableist and deficit beliefs, devaluing individuals with disabilities in our society (Nelson et al., 2020; Smith, 2001). The PARC case influenced the development of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) enacted in 1975, which lays the groundwork for future laws and legislation pertaining to students with disabilities.

Newer legislation revised the thinking to assume that equal access is full access to regular resources, including but not limited to general-education classrooms with special scaffolds and supports to help students with diverse needs (Nelson et al., 2020). According to IDEA, all children with disabilities, aged 3 to 21, must be provided with a free and appropriate public-school education. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) reported that in Fall 2018, some 95% of 6- to 21-year-old students with disabilities were served in regular schools, 3% were served in a separate school for students with disabilities, 1% were placed in regular private schools by their parents, and less than 1% each were served in one of the following environments: homebound or in a hospital, in a separate residential facility, or in a correctional facility. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) identified that about 64% of students with disabilities were educated within general education classrooms, with one general-education setting being co-taught classrooms.
What is our present education system doing to meet the needs of our most diverse learners, including but not limited to students with disabilities? A Committee on Special Education (CSE) is a team of individuals who look at the comprehensive profile of a student who is eligible for or receives special education services. The CSE includes but is not limited to the student’s parent(s) or guardian(s), a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school psychologist, a chairperson of the committee, related service providers, and when appropriate, the student (NYSED, 2010). The CSE determines eligibility based on the following criteria:

- whether the appropriateness of the regular education program and resources, including educationally related support services and academic intervention services, has been contemplated;
- whether the student needs specially designed instruction or special programs or services to meet their individual need, based on mental, physical, or emotional reasons to be successful in the general-education classroom;
- whether the school-age student can be classified as having one of the disability categories: autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, learning disability, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment.

If the CSE determines that a child is eligible for special education services, an individualized education plan (IEP) is developed. The CSE takes into account the holistic learner to develop a comprehensive and unique education plan. Once the plan is developed, the CSE must consider the educational environment that will best meet the student’s needs. The environment must be
accessible in a student’s least restrictive environment (LRE), which ensures that students with disabilities, to the maximum extent possible, are educated with other children who are nondisabled and that moving a student into a more restrictive environment outside of the general education classroom only occurs if the severity of the disability impacts the student’s ability to succeed (IDEA, 2004). The New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2013) provides a continuum of special education services. One option often considered by CSE teams, but not a federal mandate for school districts, is the inclusive, integrated co-taught setting.

As a free, democratic society, it would be just to ensure the full inclusion of all children into school life (Nelson et al., 2020). The mainstreaming, inclusive movement came to fruition in the 1980s as a way to integrate students with dis/abilities with their general-education peers (Friend et al., 2010). This concept of inclusion required students labeled as “special” to be educated with their general-education peers, rather than being isolated in separate schools or classes. It is essential to note that inclusion does not mean students with dis/abilities must assimilate to a single standard or that this group of diverse students should be ignored or mistreated (Danforth & Smith, 2005). Inclusion must include and consider each child’s individual needs (Karten & Murawski, 2020; Nelson et al., 2020). It would be naive not to recognize some potential hurdles when integrating students with diverse needs. The fears of school leaders, educational professionals, parents, community members, and students must be addressed (Nelson et al., 2020).

As a means of providing services for special-education students, integrated co-taught (ICT) classrooms have emerged. Friend et al. (2010) described co-teaching as critical. These researchers acknowledged the following:
The general educator holds these [expertise and priorities, including curriculum competencies, pacing, and classroom management] critical pieces, but the special educator adds expertise related to the process of learning, the highly individualized nature of some students’ needs, and an emphasis on teaching until mastery. (Friend et al., 2010, p. 15)

Hence, the co-taught model allows for the general education and special education teachers to collaborate and share expertise, with the ultimate goal of meeting the diverse needs of all students. The co-taught classroom allows teachers to showcase diverse skill sets since the teacher-to-student ratio decreases significantly from approximately 1:25 in a traditional classroom model, to 2:25.

Statement of the Problem

Opportunities for students to develop self-awareness, self-advocacy, and choice need to be fostered during elementary school (Luckner & Becker, 2013; Wehmeyer, 2002). Components of self-determination including problem solving and goal setting can be explicitly taught in the early elementary years (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Many elementary students are not provided with opportunities to cultivate self-determination skills because of conscious or subconscious viewpoints held by educators. These educator perspectives can be deemed as detrimental to students with disabilities and to the perceptions of general education peers (Nelson et al., 2020).

Co-teachers’ meaning making of a child with dis/abilities and self-determination need to be explored, as ableist beliefs and presumptions may extend to the institutional level within our school system and amongst teacher beliefs. This study seeks to uncover themes that will add value to research that dismantles ableist and ageist ideas and enhance the educational experience, particularly pertaining to self-determination, for students with dis/abilities.
**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study uses two theoretical frameworks: critical disability theory (CDT) and self-determination theory (SDT). Through a synthesis of these two lenses, an in-depth analysis is constructed of co-teachers’ perceptions of students with dis/abilities and how self-determining skills are hindered or fostered in the classroom. The intent is to decipher opportunities provided in the co-taught classroom for self-determination and to determine if teachers uphold ageist or ableist beliefs, whether conscious or subconscious. These theoretical frameworks are impactful, as the undertones of this study revolve around a more just society for individuals with dis/abilities and their experiences in education. The chosen frameworks work as separate and intertwined entities, which assist in a critical analysis of the topic, literature review, and the hermeneutic phenomenology of practice research design.

**Critical Disability Theory**

CDT identifies disability as a social construct, not a natural belief (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Societal beliefs and structures rooted in the dominant discourse that favors the “normal” and typical body influence individuals into believing they are more superior or inferior to another person due to ability. In this research, CDT serves as a lens to interpret findings surrounding reciprocity and present practices within education—more specifically co-teaching in elementary classrooms. CDT serves as a means to interpret opportunities granted or withheld and stigmas of individuals with dis/abilities in the school system.

Pioneering researchers, McDermott and Varenne (1995), defined disability as “cultural fabrication,” a social construct, not an inherent flaw (p. 327). CDT pulls upon the work of activists, individuals who believe in the social justice of an oppressed group, and people with dis/abilities. Hosking (2008) stated that CDT is based on three principles.
1. Disability is not the inevitable consequence of impairment, but rather a social construct.

2. “Disability is best characterized as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment” (p. 7).

3. Social disadvantages experienced by individuals who are disabled are the result of society.

CDT seeks not to diminish or criticize individuals with dis/abilities but rather to define where the stigmatized attributes are being generated in our society. Within this theory, the impact that societal views and constructs have on individuals with dis/abilities, an oppressed group is acknowledged and defied. Through this lens, research comments on societal opinions on individuals with dis/abilities and how dominant societal beliefs impact marginalized individuals. CDT challenges negative stereotypes to denaturalize ableism (Hall, 2019), while considering the polarized theories of the individual and social models of disability. Furthermore, it challenges the identification of dis/ability as a “problem” and dominant discourse rooted in negative stigmas and connotations. The social model of disability challenges the dominant discourse, suggesting that individuals with dis/abilities are stigmatized primarily due to societal constructs, not by their impairment or difference (Oliver, 1996). CDT allows for the unpacking of judgments held by teachers rooted in societal stereotypes, which may obstruct self-determination for students with dis/abilities in the co-taugh classroom.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT is a psychological framework developed to understand human motivation. The theory states that individuals are driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vinney, 2019). Students have greater responsibility and control over learning when components of self-determination, such as goal setting, problem solving, and decision making,
are fostered in the classroom (Wehmeyer, 2002). Ward (2005) recognized that individuals feel more empowered when they can make their own decisions rather than someone else, and this enhances self-esteem and self-worth.

SDT argues that individuals are motivated when three basic psychological needs are met: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vinney, 2019). SDT serves as a framework to identify whether or not co-teachers, in their viewpoints and/or practice, provide or value self-determination for students with dis/abilities. This framework serves to interpret co-teachers’ willingness to foster independence, autonomy, and motivation for their students.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how elementary co-teaching teams make meaning of self-determination for elementary students with dis/abilities. More specifically, this research explores how age and dis/ability perceptions influence co-teachers’ construction of self-determination and, in turn, co-teachers’ practice for students receiving special education services. Co-teachers are defined as a general educator and special educator who collaboratively work together and share responsibilities for a portion or the entirety of their workday (Friend et al., 2010; Karten & Murawski, 2020; Villa et al., 2004). Self-determination is the compilation of one’s attitudes and abilities, which acts as a causal vehicle in an individual’s life, including the ability to independently make choices free from external influences (Wehmeyer, 2002). Self-determination contributes to the satisfaction and self-regulation of one’s life as it cultivates skills, knowledge, and opportunities (Shogren et al., 2017; Wehmeyer, 2002).
Research Questions

Within co-taught classrooms, it is unclear whether students with dis/abilities can cultivate self-determination. It is critical to understand how educators think about age and the ability associated with what a student can, or perhaps cannot, do. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the overarching question, “How do elementary co-teaching teams perceive and foster self-determination skills for students with dis/abilities in their classroom?” The research study addresses the following sub-sections:

1. How do co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms?
   a. What role does grade level play in co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?
   b. How does student dis/ability classification contribute to co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?

2. How do practices in the co-taught classroom reflect understandings of self-determination?
   a. What role does the co-teaching classroom environment play in students’ self-determination development?

Context of the Study

This study explored the meaning making of 8-12 participants from 4-6 co-teaching teams. These were the criteria when determining and selecting participants for this study:

1. The participant must be a part of a co-teaching team.
2. The participant must be either the general or special education teacher within an elementary (K-5) school setting in New York State.
3. Participants must be willing to share their experiences and meaning making surrounding the co-teaching model, students with dis/abilities, and self-determination.

**Research Methods and Design**

To explore the perceived influences that co-teachers have on the self-determining skills of students with dis/abilities, this study implements a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological research design. The phenomenological method was strategically selected, because it allows researchers to unpack potential phenomena of co-teaching students with dis/abilities and the impact on students’ self-determination opportunities. Hermeneutic phenomenology does not only describe a phenomenon but also explores and conveys its meaning in the context of everyday life (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). In addition, this research method seeks to uncover the essences, meaning, and central structures of the lived experience of a participant in correlation to the phenomena and the contexts that shape them (van Manen, 1990).

The researcher’s positionality as a certified special educator with experience in the co-taught setting was significant, because she had observed firsthand deficit-based thinking rooted in ableism and ageism for students with dis/abilities, which could hinder the growth and trajectory of the student. After being granted permission to begin the study, IRB approval was submitted. Purposeful sampling was then used to gather 8 participants based on the selection criteria outlined in the previous section. An invitation was sent to co-teachers via email to invite them to participate in the study.

Once participants were identified, a three-phase data collection transpired. The first phase of data collection consisted of an individual interview for each participant. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol to elicit the meaning making of the co-teachers surrounding the phenomenon, individually. The individual, one-on-one discussions helped ensure that the
participants’ responses were their own ideas and therefore, hypothetically, were not skewed. For the second phase of data collection, the researcher collected and analyzed a co-taught lesson plan to explore the practice of the co-teaching teams. The third phase of data collection consisted of a team interview for each co-teaching partnership. During this final phase, the researcher could follow up and delve deeper into any component of the previous stages in the research.

Throughout the first and second phases of data collection, the role of the researcher was to observe and analyze the experiences and practices that reveal (a) how co-teachers make sense of self-determination for students with dis/abilities, (b) how co-teachers provide opportunities for self-determination in their classroom, and (c) how critical disability studies and SDT characterize co-teachers’ meaning making and practices as these pertains to students with dis/abilities. The third phase of data collection reveals overarching themes and profound moments from the prior phases, which allow for (d) the interpretation of elicit ageist or ableist beliefs they themselves or their co-teacher may have toward students with dis/abilities and (e) explore co-teachers’ experiences in regard to the instruction of students with dis/abilities.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is critical to note the potential limitations of this study to improve both reliability and validity. For the purposes of this study, the researcher must assume while hoping for integrity and truthfulness, that participants may provide socially desirable responses during the individual and focus group interviews. This study aims to look at a targeted age group. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all students in ICT settings, as the research examines special education students receiving services in one type of classroom: the co-taught setting. Furthermore, the format of ICT settings is very different in all districts, limiting the generalizability of findings. All participants remain anonymous, as each was provided an
identifying number and a co-teaching team letter. Also, the research was triangulated through semi-structured interviews, artifact collection, and team interview until saturation was reached. The collection of data amongst multiple classrooms also served to strengthen the validity of the results.

In this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenology of practice study, it is important to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. The participant range of 8 to 12 was determined by two factors: first, for ease of participation and convenience, and second, to achieve saturation for more precise results. Through the triangulation of individual, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observation, findings can be deemed more trustworthy. Disconfirming results are also reported, as these findings are significant to the study. Self-reflexivity is important, so that the researcher’s conscious or subconscious biases do not interfere with the data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings.

Conclusion

This research may help to positively influence change needed to make improvements for students in special education, since teachers play an integral role in students’ success. It is hypothesized that in unpacking teachers’ viewpoints, research can contribute needed information to foster self-determining skills for students with dis/abilities at the elementary age. Through this hermeneutic, phenomenological study, the researcher determines themes as they relate to the possible influences co-teachers potentially have on students with dis/abilities. Through these themes, the results build onto pre-existing literature, with the aim to create a truly inclusive and just environment for students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom. Through the emergence of trends in co-teachers’ experiences and practices, there will be increased opportunities for elementary students with dis/abilities to develop self-determining skills.
The following chapter reviews pertinent literature that is seminal to this dissertation topic. Through this analysis of research, a unique argument rooted in principles of social justice for students with dis/abilities in education is based on previous work of influential scholars. This dissertation serves as a call for reform in elementary teachers’ perspectives of students with dis/abilities. The opportunities to cultivate self-determination must be a part of an inclusive, just educational program.

**Definition of Terms**

**Ableism.** Ableism can be defined as the devaluation of disability (Hehir, 2009). Bogart and Dunn (2019) further defined ableism as “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities” (p. 650). Ableism refers to the marginalization and oppression of individuals with disabilities, the largest minority group.

**Ageism.** The discrimination of a person or peoples due to their age is ageism (Nussbaum & Levmore, 2017). The concept of ageism was first addressed in the 1960s by Robert Butler, a psychologist, whose original intent was to unpack the oppression of the elderly. However, ageism can be considered a term that can unpack the marginalization of any aged person, including children.

**Co-teaching.** Co-teaching is the collaboration of a general education teacher and a special education teacher, or other specialized instructor. The co-teachers jointly plan and deliver instruction to a diverse group of learners, which may include students with disabilities (Friend, 2008).

**Dis/ability.** Dis/ability dismantles dominant discourse rooted in ableist beliefs when speaking to or about individuals with dis/abilities. Dis/ability allows for individuals to be
recognized by what they can do, not just what they cannot. Dis/ability also challenges societal stereotypes, notions, and biases (Connor et al., 2016).

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP).** An IEP is developed for students when they are eligible for special education services and/or programs. This IEP will be specific to the child and consider his or her unique needs (NYSED, 2002).

**Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT).** ICT refers to the combined delivery of specially designed instruction and general academic instruction to a group of students, including those with disabilities and those without (NYSED, 2013). ICT is not a mandated placement for students with dis/abilities, but rather something that should be considered to best meet the needs of the child.

**Self-Determination.** Self-determination is the combination of beliefs, skills, and knowledge that allows individuals to demonstrate goal-oriented, self-regulated, autonomous behavior (Field et al., 1998).

**Special education.** According to the NYSED (2002), “Special education means specially designed individualized or group instruction or special services or programs to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. Special education services and programs are provided at no cost to the parent” (p. 1).
Chapter 2

A Review of the Literature

Self-determination is a skill critical to student success, particularly for students with dis/abilities (Ward, 2005; Wehmeyer, 2002; Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). Students with dis/abilities must learn skills associated with self-determination at an early age so that, over time, they can strengthen abilities and help foster independence, which includes the extent to which the student acts based on personal beliefs, values, interests, and abilities (Luckner & Becker, 2013; Test & Neale, 2004; Wehmeyer, 2002).

Self-advocacy, self-awareness, and motivation are direct results of self-determination (Sinclair et al., 2017; Ward, 2005). However, as an overwhelming majority, schools are enabling special education students in the co-taught classroom, not allowing them to grow or exceed their potential (Daniel, 2000). Therefore, educators need to understand how to provide students with dis/abilities with greater opportunities to advocate for their education. CDT and SDT are two integral theoretical frameworks that can help to explain the dynamics surrounding intersections of ableist and ageist perceptions and students with dis/abilities.

For individuals with dis/abilities, forms of oppression are seen at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Ableism encompasses the discrimination against people with disabilities, the model that able bodies are superior, and a characterization of a disability as weakness (Ladau, 2021; Neely-Barnes et al., 2010). Educators often do not think of the everlasting impact that ableist notions may have on students with disabilities. These ableist notions can impact the self-determination skills of students with dis/abilities.

It is critical to examine discourse and language that can be defined as ableist. Special education is rooted in categorical discourse where there are two types of students: the “special”
and typical or normal (Ballard, 1999), an arbitrary idea of normalcy (Ladau, 2021). In fact, the title students with disabilities is a term in need of reimagining to highlight the assets of an individual, not the deficits. CDT aims to eliminate ableist beliefs by examining not physical or mental limitations but instead the societal norms that categorize certain traits as disabilities and the social circumstances that concentrate these stigmatized traits among specific populations (Schalk, 2017). CDT challenges societal norms and preconceived notions about disabled individuals.

Intersectionality refers to every identity of an individual and how it intersects to construct the person they are (Crenshaw, 1989). Ableism and ageism impact students with dis/abilities, as separate forms of identity, but also as overlapping marginalization. This research hypothesizes that teachers of elementary-aged children with dis/abilities believe the student may be too young to foster self-determination skills.

Considering the intersections between dis/ability and youth oppression as it pertains to self-determination is also critical. Ableism and ageism are not two separate groups but rather two overlapping entities that have a considerable impact on elementary-aged learners. In thinking of the self-determination skills of elementary students with diverse needs, one must note how the construct of institutions oppresses the child, by not providing opportunity, often due to both their age and dis/ability classification (Ryan et al., 2011). The following sections discuss research surrounding educators’ perspectives and how students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom are provided opportunities for self-determination.

**Self-Determination**

*Self-determination* can broadly be defined as having the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to drive one’s life in a self-regulated and directed way, contributing to satisfaction
(Shogren et al., 2017). In children, self-determination allows the student to set their goals, make life decisions, self-advocate freely, and strive toward the achievement of set goals (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). There are several self-determination skills to help children with dis/abilities reach their goals, such as self-knowledge, self-regulation, decision making, planning skills, self-advocacy, goal setting and attainment skills, choice making, and self-awareness (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002).

Many educational stakeholders, other than students, play a vital role in cultivating self-determination. Parents and teachers arguably make all decisions for elementary-aged students. It is critical to analyze how these relationships support and challenge the acquisition of self-determination skills for students with dis/abilities. Educators see self-determination as important, particularly during transitional or middle school years.

*Educators’ Views on Self-Determination*

Stang et al. (2009) sought to determine elementary and middle school teachers’ values and instructional choices pertaining to self-determination skills. They analyzed findings regarding the extent to which opportunities in early elementary grades are provided for students to demonstrate self-determination. Overall, elementary school teachers stated the importance of teaching self-determination skills. However, more than half of the participants noted that only problem solving, self-management, and self-regulation were taught within their classroom. This research identified that 92% of sampled educators recognized the importance of self-determining skills, a discrepancy with the present lack of observable self-determining skills in a majority of elementary classrooms.

One can conclude that the most cardinal educational domain was problem solving, then self-management and self-regulation, decision making, and goal setting. Compared to their
elementary teacher colleagues, middle school educators, similar to many of the other studies, taught self-determination more frequently. *Self-determination* is a concept that has been explored in detail throughout the past decade but still requires further exploration (Stang et al., 2009). When and how should these self-determining skills be fostered? Self-determination can enhance academic and social experiences for students with disabilities, particularly students with cognitive or learning disabilities, and should be taught in the elementary years since “waiting until adolescence simply means waiting too long” (Stang et al., 2009, p. 95).

In their quantitative study, Cho et al. (2013) determined the predictors of the perceptions and practices of general and special educators surrounding self-determination. Researchers found a discrepancy in teachers’ perceptions about the importance of self-determination—a gap in the research regarding what factors affect elementary educators’ perceptions of the importance of teaching self-determination. It is critical to note when educators think this self-determination should occur.

**Fostering Self-Determination in Special Education**

Fostering self-determination addresses all the necessary skills and knowledge that students need to assume more responsibility for their lives. The improvement of self-determination in children with dis/abilities increases their chances of success as adults (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). Self-determination skills must be incorporated into school practices that provide high-quality transition programs as early as elementary and middle school. Self-determination strategies for students in schools include the following: encouraging students to make their own academic and personal goals, educating students on the importance of directing their own learning, maintaining high expectations, active problem solving and choice opportunities, and collaboration rooted in partnerships between home and school (Denney &
Daviso, 2012). Educators should help students with disabilities make goals and relate them to their daily choices and decisions. These are important choices and decisions, as they influence their daily activities, schedules, and post-school outcomes.

Another important strategy that educators can adopt is teaching children how to direct their learning (Denney & Daviso, 2012). This can be achieved by making the students evaluate their completed work compared to a standard one. Skills such as self-instruction and self-evaluation assist students with diverse needs in learning academic content and can also be applied in their careers and community work experience programs.

Educators maintaining high expectations also goes a long way in fostering self-determination. The educators should emphasize these students’ unique strengths and abilities, often by having them engage in broad school activities such as plays, talent shows, and extracurricular activities (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Students should be required to realize their strengths and perhaps even their weaknesses.

To assist children in being more self-determined, educators should help them form and sustain productive relationships, an essential aspect of instruction (Field & Hoffman, 2012). These relationships need to be built on autonomy, relatedness, and competency. Educators can help develop and maintain these relationships in children by increasing their self-awareness, training them on social skills, and promoting positive teacher–student interactions. Some programs that promote self-determination in higher education may be applicable to elementary education. According to Getzel (2014), some of these programs include using peer-to-peer mentoring programs to assist students who struggle with their academic work; using education coaches to help students with diverse needs meet their academic schedule; and enhancing
collaboration across university campuses to improve the possibilities of retention, graduation, further education, and eventually, employment.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Although the concept of *self-determination* provides insight into the mechanisms that can positively impact the experiences of students with dis/abilities, the use of SDT as a framework allows for an in-depth look at the dynamics related to the self-determination process. SDT seeks to understand human motivation through three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vinney, 2019). The notion of intrinsic motivation plays a substantial role in SDT: the drive to engage in activity or behavior for the reward that results from it. The progress of these propensities and qualities is dependent on the nature and kind of support received from a person’s social environment, which may promote or threaten their intrinsic motivation (Hui & Tsang, 2012). The theory has two dominant assumptions: the first is that the need for growth drives behavior, and the second is that autonomous motivation is essential (Cherry, 2021).

Educators often use the SDT framework to enhance positive student outcomes in the education setting, including students with dis/abilities. Educators are encouraged to support autonomy in students by minimizing external rewards such as grades or making comparisons among performances in class and instead orienting themselves to students’ expressed goals and interests, ultimately cultivating intrinsic motivation. Students tend to perform poorly when they understand that the primary goal of studying is to obtain external rewards, when driven by extrinsic motivators. This only builds tension and anxiety in students as opposed to when they believe that exams are simply to monitor their learning process (Pelletier & Joussemet, 2016). Reeve and Halusic (2009) determined that the quality of an educator’s inspiring style during
teaching exists on a bipolar continuum ranging from highly controlling to autonomy supportive. An educator identifies, nurtures, and develops the students’ intrinsic motivational resources such as their engagement, enhanced motivation, and other psychological needs with autonomy (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Students gain an advantage when their instructors support their autonomy. This is evident through their improved motivation, classroom engagement, learning abilities, and their psychological well-being (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). According to Hui and Tsang (2012), higher autonomy results in lower rates of school dropouts, lower levels of stress and anxiety, and more positive coping strategies.

Autonomy-supportive teaching, which is within SDT, is unique. Reeve and Halusic (2009) found that educators who support this form of teaching begin with a deeply rooted preparedness to prioritize students’ opinions and perspectives during learning. Doing so usually involves encouraging students’ participation in class, managing their assessments, and asking them reflective questions. The SDT helps students with dis/abilities to attain ideal learning through the autonomy-supportive style when applied by their teachers. Research shows a positive relationship between autonomy support and students’ self-determination, engagement, and adjustment. Researchers claim higher academic performance, better self-esteem, competence, self-control, and creativity in autonomously motivated students (Hui & Tsang, 2012). They display more flexible learning and a positive attitude in their academic work. An autonomy-supportive teaching style and the environment generally enhance students with dis/abilities’ competence, interest in learning, and enjoyment. They tend to learn how to be more self-determined and autonomous, leading to notable improvements in academic performance. Child development theories and societal views of individuals with dis/abilities must be
constructed to gain a deeper understanding of how marginalization due to age or ability plays a factor in self-determination.

Theories of Child Development and Self-Determination

It is important for students with dis/abilities to have opportunities to be self-determining, because this is a necessary skill for life beyond school. However, students with dis/abilities may face barriers to possessing or developing self-determination in schools due to ideological forces that may contribute to teachers’ views of whether or not it is appropriate for children to participate in decision making about their education. Ageism can have a significant impact on elementary-aged students. Research has shown that children as young as five years old can hold negative stereotypes about aging and that early exposure to ageism can contribute to decreased self-esteem and negative self-perceptions in later life (Jackson & Rudman, 2010). Ageism can also lead to lower levels of self-esteem and increased anxiety and depression in young children (Kosberg & Listwan, 2012). In addition, ageism can impact young children’s future outlook by internalizing negative stereotypes about aging, leading to decreased self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness (Nussbaum & Steele, 2008). This can have lasting effects on their psychological well-being and future success. Addressing ageism in children is important for promoting positive self-perceptions and healthy development, and it is crucial that teachers and parents work to counteract negative attitudes about aging in young children. The impact of ageism on elementary-aged students should not be underestimated. Addressing ageism in children is important for promoting positive self-perceptions, healthy development, and well-being. Ageism and ableism may deter adults from allowing children to be self-determining; this is not just a matter of fact, but rather a societal construct that often hinders the experiences of students with
disabilities. To unpack ageism and how it impacts self-determination, it is important to discuss two theories of child development.

Cognitive perspectives of child development refer to the focus on the processes that allow individuals to know, think, and understand the world (Feldman, 2012). Based on his work with children, Piaget (1963) developed a four-stage model of development, arranging his work into organized patterns that represent actions and behaviors:

1. sensorimotor (0–2 years)
2. preoperational (2–7 years)
3. concrete operational (7–12 years)
4. formal operational (12+ and more)

According to Piaget, the first stage is the sensorimotor stage, which lasts from birth to 2 years of age. During this stage, children are developing their motor skills and the idea of object permanence, which is the understanding that people and objects exist, even when they are not seen. At this stage, children have little to no ability for symbolic representation. The second stage, the preoperational stage, occurs from the ages of 2 to 7 years. During this stage, children are characterized by egocentric thinking and the development of language and symbolic thinking. The concrete operational stage occurs from the ages of 7 to 12 years. Children at this stage have mastered the concept of reversibility and are developing the idea of conservation, which is the understanding that the amount of a substance is not related to its physical appearance. Finally, the formal operational stage, which occurs from the age of 12 and continues into adulthood, is characterized by the development of abstract and logical thinking.

The preoperational and concrete operational stages of a student’s development have a significant impact on their cognitive development and their ability to understand language and
logical thinking. This, in turn, may affect a student’s ability to develop self-determining skills. The use of Piagetian theory is widely used in the field of education to determine if instructional practices and opportunities are developmentally appropriate for elementary students (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hindle & Perry, 2007); this notion may extend to the varied skills that constitute self-determination.

Psychosocial stages of development imply that both culture and society challenge and shape an individual (Feldman, 2012). The psychosocial stages suggest that a sense of identity is not cultivated until adolescence, as this is when developmentally individuals may begin to make strides toward adulthood (Erikson, 1983; Feldman, 2012). However, during the early school years, ages 5 to 11, children begin to develop a sense of pride through social interactions and feeling a sense of accomplishment based on their abilities (Erikson, 1983). Success leads to a sense of competency, a key component of self-determination. Furthermore, middle childhood (ages 7–11) can be seen as instrumental years in child development, since during this period, students should develop a sense of industry and learn to cooperate with both their peers and adults. If skills are not developed during this time, a sense of inferiority may emerge. Furthermore, during this more targeted age of 7 through 11, children become aware of strategies and specific styles used in their learning process. Although there is evidence to prove the importance of opportunities for students in the middle childhood years, students with dis/abilities are often not considered “able”.
Both Piaget’s (1963) theory of cognitive development and Erikson’s (1983) psychosocial stages of development must be considered when discussing the self-determination of elementary students with dis/abilities. The push and pull of these two theories of development can arguably impact students with dis/abilities, identifying when “typical” child-development opportunities should occur instead of self-determination. Doll et al. (1996) outlined self-determining
opportunities that can be provided to students. At the early elementary age, the curriculum should allow for the following:

- choices, exercising a student’s ability to control a situation,
- early problem-solving skills, which can be explicitly taught through teacher modeling,
- the correlation between choices and consequences through feedback,
- foundational self-management skills.

Doll et al. (1996) further suggested that during the late elementary years, self-determination should be accessible through the following:

- systematic analysis of potential options, considering both the benefits and disadvantages in the decision,
- the cultivation of personal and academic goals, and necessary steps needed to achieve the goal,
- self-reflective practices.

Arguably, in considering child development, students are ready to be exposed to self-determining skills during the elementary years (Doll et al., 1996; Erickson, 1983; Piaget, 1963). Although this may not be appropriate for all students with dis/abilities, some classified students may not be provided opportunities due to learned helplessness, a result of cognitive exhaustion.

Learned helplessness is present amongst students when they believe their own behavior has no impact on consequential events (Sutherland et al., 2004). Students with a history of school failure or academic difficulties—often students with dis/abilities—are at risk of falling into a learned helplessness cycle (Fincham et al., 1989; Sutherland et al., 2004). Failure to ask for assistance, frustration, lack of motivation and effort, low self-esteem, poor motivation, and procrastination are some of the many factors that children with learned helplessness display in
the school setting (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980). One way to halt this detrimental cycle is to foster self-determining skills.

Acknowledging learned helplessness and the two discussed theories of development can lead to academic and behavioral payoffs; ultimately, teaching self-determining skills can lead to tremendous gains for students with dis/abilities. In accordance with the background of the child, the trajectory and troubled history of individuals with dis/ability must be acknowledged to learn from and launch new structures for the education of students with dis/abilities.

**Societal Views of Dis/Ability**

By definition, *able* is “having sufficient power, skill, or resources to do something” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Furthermore, if one were to look at the prefix *dis-*-, you can ultimately conclude the meaning of *not*. Therefore, when we speak of an individual as disabled, one is assuming that this particular person is inferior, as they are not “able.” This notion is the underlying theme that runs throughout ableism. To elaborate, Charlton (1998) spoke further about disability oppression at the societal level, highlighting important information to note. He stated that this oppression is a direct product of what has transpired in the past and present. Charlton (1998) challenged logic by simply thinking of the history of frequently utilized words to describe individuals with dis/ability. For example, “cripple,” “invalid,” and “retard” are jargon frequently associated with dis/abilities. Also, the word “handicapped” originated in England, where many individuals with dis/ability would use their cap to beg for money (Ladau, 2021; Ostiguy-Finneran & Peters, 2018). Charlton (1998) profoundly stated, “beliefs and attitudes about disability are individually experienced but socially constructed” (p. 51).

It is critical to examine the history of dis/ability in America. Ostiguy-Finneran and Peters (2018) depicted some of the pivotal oppressors of individuals with dis/abilities, as noted below.
• Dis/ability was originally seen through the lens of religion. It was thought that an individual with dis/abilities was an unchangeable condition, which was a direct result of sin.

• Western societies did not treat babies or children with disabilities justly. These infants were often dropped off buildings or abandoned.

• To showcase and often mock individuals with dis/abilities, “freak shows” were developed in Europe and the United States.

• This history of oppression was not merely prevalent through actions but also words. Early Western medical textbooks identified individuals with disabilities as genetically defective, and a medical goal was to “cure” these individuals.

• The early 19th century started the Eugenics movement, where individuals would seek to eliminate undesirable genetic traits, which impacted individuals with dis/abilities, particularly in the Second World War.

• It was not until the 1960s that legislation was initiated due to the Independent Living Movement.

• In 2008, the amendment to the Americans with Disabilities Act expanded the definition of dis/ability.

Elementary students with dis/abilities are doubly oppressed, because ageism and ableism intersect at the notion of “appropriate.” Students at certain ages are granted rites of passage because the task is deemed “appropriate.” In addition, individuals with dis/abilities can participate in discussion surrounding their education (for example, at IEP meetings) when someone more powerful deems their involvement as “appropriate.” The word appropriate is utilized by the powerful and in federal mandates purposefully, as it is flexible. This word
arguably allows for interpretation and is subjective. Although *appropriate* does provide some sort of a framework of guideline, saying “when appropriate” in both legislation and literature does not consider background experience. In this scenario, there are unspoken assumptions pertaining to age and ability that tacitly define when something is “appropriate,” potentially hindering the growth of a child with dis/abilities. The challenges presented by the appropriateness and restrictions placed on students with dis/abilities due to societal constructs are challenged utilizing CDT.

**Critical Disability Theory**

The 1970s were instrumental years, as dis/ability rights activists shed light on inequities for individuals with dis/abilities. The disability rights movement was grounded in principles that challenged the status quo: the concept of “normal.” Stemming from this movement, disability justice highlights the voices of individuals whose bodies and minds do not conform to the norms generated by society (Berne, 2018).

As a guiding principle, dis/ability must be viewed as a social discipline that should be studied (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Activists for individuals with dis/abilities wanted to weigh it together with ideas of justice. The most important aspect of disability studies is that it tries to change the long-term mentality that people have in regard to disability (Danforth, 2016). The pioneers of critical disability studies identified disability as a social construct, and therefore, people must change their mentality rooted in concepts suggesting that dis/ability is a misfortune (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017).

This theoretical framework considers the perspectives of individuals with disabilities, bringing to fruition the need for action and reform within the education system. Oliver (2013) argued for conceptual distinctions when he generated the social model of disability. Prior to the
development of the social model, dis/ability was seen as a deficit and “personal tragedy” that must be cured (Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability is based on thematic ideas from the Fundamental Principles of Disability document (UPIAS 1976), which supposed that disabled people were “not disabled by our impairments but by the disabling barriers [we] faced in society” (p. 1024).

CDT challenges the discourse and language used by institutions of government, as well as the professional fields of rehabilitation and special education taught in higher education institutions (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). The language surrounding disability has been through a diagnostic lens that enforces an individual deficiency (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). CDT calls for innovation and rewriting the script for institutions, including the field of education. CDT insists on shifting away from fixations and understandings that are binary; for example, thinking of disability through the lens of a social or medical model. CDT allows researchers to understand if ableism plays a role in fostering or hindering self-determination for students with disabilities within the co-taught classroom. To understand the focus on co-taught classrooms as a key component of this study, legislative practices related to students with dis/abilities and their experiences in education should be considered.

**Legislative Impact**

In thinking innovatively, we must re-evaluate practices and structures in educating students with dis/abilities. It is critical to first examine some of the legislation that impacts diverse learners. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990, amended 2008) defined *disability* as a physical or mental impairment that significantly impacts and causes limitations to one or more major life activities. One such significant life activity is learning.
The IDEA (2004) requires public schools to provide special education and related services to students classified in 1 of the 13 disability categories. When a student qualifies for special education services, an IEP is developed. The 13 dis/ability categories as proposed by IDEA are as follows: specific learning disability, other health impairment, autism spectrum disorder, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, deafness, hearing impairment, deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairment, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, and multiple disabilities.

Section 300.321 of IDEA proposes that the child’s IEP team includes the parent of the child, at least one general education teacher, at least one special education teacher, a representative of a public agency, an individual who can interpret the results, related service professionals, and “when appropriate,” the child. According to data retrieved from the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 2021-2022, the number of school-aged students, 3 to 21, who received special education services was 7.3 million or 15% of all public-school students. Hence, all these students have IEPs. Special education law and policy indicates that students should be involved in these annual IEP meetings; however, this is overwhelmingly not an occurrence.

IDEA elaborates that students must be invited to their IEP meeting if the purpose is to consider postsecondary goals and transition services. Furthermore, IDEA mandated considering the participation of students with IEPs in their own meetings, when appropriate, for all students over 14 years old (IDEA, Public Law 105-07). Educators must provide students with opportunities to express themselves, for their voices to be heard. In the realm of special education, there is much research that supports the notion of early intervention in association with students’ academic achievement. Following the mindset and positive effects of early
intervention, why are we waiting until a student is aged 14 to involve them in the IEP process? It is necessary that students be involved in the IEP process at an earlier age.

It is interesting to further explore statements from the U.S. Department of Education (2021), which contradict some of the legislature published by IDEA:

Until the child reaches the age of majority under State law, unless the rights of the parent to act for the child are extinguished or otherwise limited, only the parent has the authority to make educational decisions for the child under Part B of the Act, including whether the child should attend an IEP meeting. (71 Fed. Reg. at 46671)

Contrary to IDEA’s proposal to include students when speaking about transition, or when a child is 14 years old, the U.S. Department of Education stated that the decision of whether or not a student shall be involved in an IEP is in the hands of the parent. Clearly, there is substantial work to be done in accordance with student participation in IEP meetings regarding what is ethically appropriate for each child with diverse needs.

But what is ethically appropriate for all children? By excluding the child’s voice in many instances, we marginalize students with dis/abilities. Should parents have the final say as to whether their child should participate in the meeting? In an analogous medical study, researchers Dickey et al. (2002) analyzed the ability of school-aged children to consent to their own medical care. These researchers elaborated that the “prevention of minors’ participation in the planning of their own care, especially those in the 13-to-18-year age range, defies autonomy rights and stunts developmental progress toward independent behavior” (p. 179). Dickey et al. (2002) concluded that what is ethically reasonable and fair is the involvement of minors, when developmentally able, in their health care decisions, as this will help prepare the youth for the future, ultimately fostering advocacy. To juxtapose the findings of this analogous medical study to the field of
education, one may conclude that educators must provide students with opportunities to express themselves pertaining to their education. This is generalized to special education in regard to IEP meetings, as students must be involved in the IEP process when developmentally appropriate. Through inclusion in the IEP process, the student can note their strengths, weaknesses, and desires in regard to their education, which can lead to an increase in self-determination skills for students with disabilities (Test & Neale, 2004).

The plethora of benefits associated with student involvement in the IEP process is undeniable. Konrad (2008) suggested that students explore their IEPs while still integrating necessary skills to assimilate this knowledge. The researcher also identified how educators can embed learning standards and perhaps even a student’s current IEP goal(s) within learning. In doing so, students’ ability to self-advocate and individual accountability for learning will become more transparent.

Furthermore, section 504, under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ensures a free, appropriate public education for all students with disabilities. It is important to recognize that discussed legislation refers to individuals as disabled. This is arguably a manifestation of ableism and something worth noting. IDEA (2004) enforces the need for all students with disabilities to learn within their LRE in the general education classroom, when appropriate, to the largest extent possible. It is necessary to examine legislation that impacts learning. The NCLB Act (2002) required all students to have access to a curriculum that is of high academic rigor and aligned to the rigor of state standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which replaced ideals implemented by NCLB, gives states the ability to generate accountability for reaching the diverse needs of all learners and the opportunities to provide more funding and knowledge for special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004)
proposed notions of NCLB through an amendment that included the education of all students in their LRE. This legislation suggested that students with special needs should be integrated with their general education peers, when appropriate, while still being provided specialized instruction to help meet their diverse learning profiles. In response to this legislation, inclusion is seen in many schools as a student’s placement adhering to LRE.

**Inclusion**

A socially inclusive society is “one where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs are met so they can live in dignity” (Robo, 2014, p. 191). Stemming from this idea, inclusive education includes acting upon inclusive values; supporting everyone in a sense of belonging; increasing participation for students in learning activities; reducing discrimination, exclusion, and potential barriers to learning; and reinventing policy and practice to respond to diversity that emphasizes the value of all societal groups (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Therefore, for students with dis/abilities, inclusion in school is one integral component of inclusion in society (Robo, 2014).

Inclusion is a right of all students. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (2007), *inclusion* requires the following:

- the recognition of all children as full members of society and the respect of all of their rights, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, language, poverty or impairment. Inclusion involves the removal of barriers that might prevent the enjoyment of these rights and requires the creation of appropriate supportive and protective environments. (p. 1)

UNICEF recognized the significance of inclusion for all children at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Children have the right to be included in all aspects of society, including schools.
Furthermore, students from culturally diverse backgrounds have the right to be included in classrooms; this includes but is not limited to students with dis/ability.

Inclusion, in theory, embraces the idea that learners of varied ability levels are educated together, side by side (Friend, 2016; Karten & Murawski, 2020). Huberman et al. (2012) recognized that integration with general education peers, when flexible and implemented correctly, is highly effective for special education students. There should be a dedicated focus on the importance of bridging the gap between special education and general education students. Inclusive classrooms provide special education students with opportunities for similar expectations and instruction as their peers, which can be significantly beneficial to their sense of being part of the school community and preparing for success after graduation (Test et al., 2005).

It is critical to examine and deduce the true meaning of inclusion within the context of education. A common assumption or misconception related to the concept of inclusion is the belief that all students should be placed in the general education classroom for the majority of the school day (Iannacci, 2018). Inclusion should be regarded as a range or continuum of services provided through special education, which are indicative of the individual student’s needs. Iannacci (2018) recognized the importance of programming options and striving for an environment, which is safe; engaging; responsive to students’ needs; and does not academically, socially, psychologically, or emotionally oppress students with dis/abilities. Inclusion values belonging (Karten & Murawski, 2020). Furthermore, it is imperative to note inclusion as a fluid and flexible practice dictated by federal and state special education law and policy. Special education is a service and therefore can be changed to be more restrictive or less restrictive based on the needs of the student.
Co-teaching became (and arguably still is) a frequently utilized pedagogical practice to meet the needs of diverse learners, including students with dis/abilities, after a shift in federal legislation. Mastropieri et al. (2005) acknowledged the complexity of schools and the diverse profiles of students across the nation. Researchers proposed a shift in instructional practices that can align and meet student needs through co-teaching. Friend et al. (2010) recognized co-teaching as the effective by-product of federal legislation to help all students, regardless of their educational needs, to have access to the same instruction.

**Co-Teaching**

Co-teaching is when two or more professionals jointly deliver instruction to diverse, or blended, groups of students in a single physical space (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend et al., 2010; Karten & Murawski, 2020; Volonino & Zigmond, 2007). The benefits of co-teaching for students include the availability of two teachers, smaller student–teacher ratio, and closer attention to behavior. The benefits of co-teaching for teachers include professional satisfaction, immediate feedback, and avoidance of student conflict (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Walther-Thomas, 1997). Villa et al. (2004) suggested that co-teaching is built upon trust, open and honest communication, and collaborative approaches. The co-taught model allows general education and special education teachers to collaborate and share expertise, with the ultimate goal of meeting the diverse needs of all students. A successful co-teaching team “values differences and never uses them to separate or stigmatize the learners or one another” (Karten & Murawski, 2020, p. 153). Magiera and Zigmond (2005) identified three major goals of co-teaching: giving access to a wider range of instructional options, including students with general education peers, and enhancing the performance of students with diverse needs. When
co-teachers trust and complement one another, more modifications and accommodations for students with disabilities are instilled within the classroom (Mastropieri et al., 2005).

**The Six Models of Co-Teaching.** Cook and Friend (1995) defined six models of co-teaching, which, when used, can best fit the anticipated instructional outcomes and present information based on the different modalities of the students in the classroom. The six models are as follows:

- **One teach, one observe** occurs when one of the teachers leads whole-group instruction while the other collects academic, behavioral, or social data.
- **Station teaching** occurs when there are three non-sequential groups and tasks for students. Two of the stations are teacher led, while the third is independent.
- **Parallel teaching** allows teachers to deliver the same lesson, perhaps slightly differentiated or geared to a different modality, to half of the class simultaneously.
- **Alternative teaching** allows one teacher to work with most of the group, while the other teacher pulls a small group for either reteaching, remediation, or enrichment.
- **Teaming** is when both teachers jointly deliver the lesson to the whole class.
- **One teach, one assist** occurs when one teacher provides instruction to the whole class, while the other teacher floats around the classroom, offering to provide individual support as needed.

It is critical to examine the co-teaching models, all of which can be utilized to appropriately deliver instruction to students with dis/abilities in their LRE. Co-teaching provides a framework and best practice for this model within the continuum of special education services.

Although co-teaching can be an ideal placement for many students with dis/abilities, challenges in the structure in conjunction or isolation with co-teacher relationship may hinder
student success. Bessette (2008) noted that “co-teaching is designed to facilitate the integration of students with disabilities into the general education classroom while meeting the needs of all students” (p. 1392). Special education teachers often feel under-utilized and comparable to an extension to the general education teacher. The general education teacher becomes the content specialist, while the special education teacher may, at various points, mirror the job of an aide (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Often, there is an authority structure in the classroom with the general education teacher in the dominant role. This uneven status can weaken partnerships and even lead to dissolution (Bessette, 2008). Co-teachers may not necessarily utilize the most effective methods and models, which can negatively impact student performance. For co-teaching teams to be successful and propel student growth, collaboration is essential (Friend et al., 2010; Karten & Murawski, 2020).

Significance of Collaboration. Collaboration in schools is a requirement for student success. Throughout a school day, there are various professionals that students with dis/abilities may interact with. These professionals include, but are not limited to, general education teachers, special educators, speech pathologists, guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and special class teachers. It is essential that these professionals collaborate to meet the needs of the learners in the school and recognize that collaboration takes time, hard work, patience, and openness to others’ perspectives.

Co-teaching requires a wealth of collaboration since teachers are asked to teach a wider range of diverse students, partially due to the shift in the inclusive movement. It demands a relationship grounded in respect between the general education and special education teachers. Friend et al. (2010) noted that for effective collaboration to occur in co-taught classrooms, issues in program logistics, such as common planning time, must be addressed. Altieri et al. (2015)
suggested that collaborative practices are continuously evolving and are beneficial in providing
services to students with disabilities. Both the licensed special and general educators must
recognize the potential of collaboration to help enhance students’ learning experiences.

**Perceptions of Co-Teaching.** Beliefs upheld by school professionals and action
regarding both labeling and placement of students from marginalized groups must be unveiled to
dismantle the oppression of individuals with dis/abilities in schools (Ferguson et al., 2019). The
dysconscious biases, implicit and unconscious attitudes, beliefs, or prejudices that people hold
toward individuals or groups—at the micro (individual) and meso (societal) levels—must be
understood. Due to recent federal legislation (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002), students have the right
to be included amongst their general education peers to the greatest extent possible. Furthermore,
students with diverse needs are entitled to high rigor and expectations, which should be provided
within the general education classroom as often as possible. Connor et al. (2016) stated,
“...intersectional approach is an inclusive approach, recognizing complex patterns of power
related to human experiences, and the need to foreground race and dis/ability simultaneously in
all research pertaining to overrepresentation” (p. 726). Through this lens, and through in-depth
introspection, one can challenge deficit thinking. Although in theory, co-teaching should be
effective, this model can be ineffective when not implemented appropriately. To truly understand
the experiences of co-teaching, it is imperative to examine the perceptions of the teachers in the
classroom and students.

**Teachers.** It is crucial to analyze the views of teachers regarding co-taught classrooms.
Walther-Thomas (1997) determined that there is a plethora of benefits associated with co-taught
classrooms, including the increase of professional satisfaction, opportunities for reflection and
professional growth, support between co-teachers, and a natural time for collaboration. Stiefel et
Al. (2018) mentioned that time for co-planning positively affected co-teachers’ perspectives. In addition, the relationship of the co-teachers had a tremendous impact on both educators and scholars. However, themes emerged, which note the persistent problems of co-taught classrooms. Teachers noted frustrations due to lack of time to collaborate and generate meaningful lessons, student scheduling, concerns of students on caseload, support of the administration, and lack of professional development (Walther-Thomas, 1997).

Altieri et al. (2015) reported the viewpoints of collaboration in the co-taught model of 32 teachers. All of these teachers reported that the co-taught model positively affected at least some, if not all, of the special education students in their classrooms. The positive effects included classroom performance, test scores, and classroom behavior. Due to the increased student–teacher ratio in the co-taught model, which allows for both the special and general educators to have more flexibility in their choice of instruction, a majority of students with special education services were able to make progress.

Bessette (2008) found that the delivery of instruction was an area of concern for both general education and special education teachers. Co-teachers alluded to four dominant co-teaching approaches (one teach, one observe; one teach, one drift; alternative teaching; and team teaching). It is important for co-teachers to consider the co-teaching model that best suits the needs of the learners in the classroom.

To further examine teacher perspectives, the viewpoints of preservice teachers were analyzed. Preservice teachers refer to individuals who are studying to become teachers and have not yet completed their teacher training or certification program. They are often enrolled in a teacher-education program at a university or college, where they receive theoretical instruction and practical training in teaching methods and strategies. Preservice teachers are in the process
of developing their skills and knowledge in preparation for entering the teaching profession. In a quantitative study, Henning and Mitchell (2002) examined preservice teachers’ attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities. They found preservice teachers’ feelings of teaching efficacy improved after several class sessions surrounding the concept of inclusion; teachers felt more prepared to educate students with dis/abilities. Silverman (2007) found a positive correlation between epistemological beliefs and positive attitudes toward inclusion. Arndt and Liles (2010) found preservice teachers were open to co-teaching but had concerns about the model. Both special education and general education preservice teachers (secondary social studies teaching candidates) experienced anxieties surrounding their presentation and ability to manage both students and content in an inclusive classroom. A divergence in knowledge bases between special education and social studies led to distinct spheres of practice and a perception of varying roles among preservice teachers (PSTs) when it came to lesson design (Arndt & Liles, p. 20). It can be inferred that teachers with different certifications recognize strengths of background knowledge and the importance of collaboration to meet the varying needs of learners.

At times, there is hesitation among teachers to embrace being part of a co-taught classroom. Special education teachers often do not want to be a part of co-taught classrooms due to a lack of parity. Also, some general education teachers report that they do not want to work with students with dis/abilities for a variety of different reasons. However, it is essential that society lifts the oppression placed on individuals with dis/abilities, particularly within our school systems.

*Students.* Do students in co-taught classrooms feel the environment is inclusive for all students? Stiefel et al. (2018) sought to reveal some insight into this question through a qualitative study of 249,000 New York State students with and without dis/abilities. Stiefel et al.
CO-TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS WITH DIS/ABILITIES

(2018) provided a descriptive analysis of the feelings of both students with disabilities and their general education peers regarding inclusion. However, it is important to note the study encompassed the voices of students in inclusion and other educational settings. According to Stiefel et al. (2018), “results suggest that SWDs [Students with Disabilities] in general feel only modestly less included with their classmates but are somewhat more likely to report favorable feelings with regard to teachers, especially feeling known” (p. 111).

Students’ perspectives allow for a more holistic depiction and interpretation of experiences within the co-taught classroom. Harter and Jacobi (2018) observed how co-teaching enhanced or did not affect cognitive and affective learning for undergraduate students. The results indicated four benefits of co-teaching through the perspectives of the students: increased instructor perspectives, variety of teaching styles, increased communication skills, and alternative methods that offer a fresh perspective. Two drawbacks also emerged: confusion due to course structure and the dismissal of traditional approaches.

Keeley (2015) examined the perceptions of co-teaching through the eyes of students. She concluded that students’ perceptions of co-teaching models varied greatly across multiple categories when applied to the co-teaching models. This suggests that students are aware when receiving instruction from only one teacher. It also indicates that students prefer receiving instruction in smaller groups from both teachers as opposed to one. Students are aware of the teaching model and how it applies to their classroom experience, with a preference of parallel and team teaching. Student responses revealed that learning was significantly improved when station teaching, parallel teaching, or team teaching was utilized. These three co-teaching structures also boosted students’ level of confidence. This suggests students have a more meaningful experience when responsibilities in delivering instruction are split relatively evenly.
amongst teachers. If there are not clear goals in mind, co-teachers may cause frustration for many students (Dugan & Letterman, 2008). Blanchard (2012) found that students may be uncomfortable with the co-teaching setting when instructors are disorganized and if they are not used to being in a setting outside of the “norm.”

**The Intersection of Co-Teaching and Self-Determination**

Self-determination of learners with special needs in co-taught classrooms involves promoting the learners’ skills, attitudes, and knowledge, which gives them a chance to govern their lives (Burke et al., 2020). The co-taught classroom teaches the unique need for students to make correct decisions, solve problems on their own, plan, and take responsibility (Karten & Murawski, 2020). Students’ self-determination increases, thereby increasing their self-worth. In addition, their self-esteem grows, changing the way others view them and changing their perspective about students with disabilities. It is evident that co-taught classrooms are beneficial in accelerating self-determination for learners with various dis/abilities.

Co-teachers also foster self-advocacy to learners in the classroom by promoting collaborative learning in the form of workstations (Mann et al., 2020). Through workstations, students with dis/abilities interact with their fellow learners and practice what they have been taught. This form of learning gives the students a sense of accountability to their functions, thereby promoting individual advocacy and consultation whenever there is a challenge. Issuing independent presentation work also grants students the opportunities for self-advocacy. Through independent work, students apply information in various ways to showcase their understanding and creative skills.

Co-teaching helps to reduce the teacher–student ratio, allowing educators to focus more on individual learners (King-Sears et al., 2021). It increases student engagement in the
classroom. The focus enables students with dis/abilities to express themselves even more, promoting self-advocacy in the classroom. This is because the co-educators get a chance to understand the different needs of their students. In this way, the self-determination of learners accelerates, giving them a chance to excel academically. The co-educators sometimes create a learning atmosphere that stimulates learning by fostering opportunities for choice and self-advocacy in the classrooms. This is because the co-teachers adopt diverse teaching methods to suit the different learners’ capabilities and strengths.

*Universal Design for Learning Transforms Co-Teaching*

Universal design for learning (UDL) emerged through analogous thinking that pairs the concept of universal design for architecture to instruction, a design that would appeal and benefit all students. The Center for Applied Special Technology (2018) generated a framework for curriculum reform, utilizing the concept of universal design and considerations of Vygotsky’s work surrounding an individual’s development. UDL was created through the consideration of brain research and how universal design, the design of products, and environments that offer maximum usability transfer to teaching and learning. UDL has a focus on clear objectives and how to use multiple means of representation, engagement, action, and expression to achieve expectations (Karten & Murawski, 2020).

UDL is one technique in education that allows all students equal chances to succeed in life despite presumed ability levels (Ferguson et al., 2019). UDL suggests that a classroom, consisting of the physical space, materials, pedagogy, rules, assessments, and people can be strategically and purposefully designed so there is access for all (Center for Applied and Special Technology, 2020). The approach works to promote optimal learning and teaching conditions in the classroom. It does so by fostering participation, progress, and access to the curriculum of
learning for all students. UDL creates inclusion opportunities for diverse learners by providing multiple ways to express themselves.

UDL mechanisms enhance the lives of students with dis/abilities in schools by enacting diverse classroom management, which promotes the social inclusion of students and their educators. It also investigates building both emotional and social learning environments. The approach also creates instructional learning environments with the differentiability of opportunities in learning, which helps address various student learning modes (Ferguson et al., 2019). Co-teachers using this approach tend to apply teaching mechanisms that illustrate multiple levels of developing understanding as per the learners’ diverse developmental levels of knowledge in the classroom.

**UDL with Gradual Release of Responsibility.** Another approach is the gradual release of responsibility, which means creating a balance between learners’ and teachers’ responsibilities through guided instructions and enacting comprehensive strategies in the classroom (Webb et al., 2019). Gradual release of responsibility can help foster self-determination in learners through indirect learning methods and direct-approach methods that help put the theory learned in class into practice. Students get a chance to present their creative ideas and knowledge to others through close monitoring by the educators. It allows students to develop their interpersonal and public presentation and communication skills. For learners with special needs, it is imperative to foster their self-determination.

Co-teachers foster opportunities for self-advocacy, self-determination, and choice in the classroom by utilizing the gradual release of responsibility approach, which allows them to release some responsibility to students (Johnson et al., 2020). Relenting responsibility to students will enable them to become capable thinkers independently. The teachers also foster self-
advocacy opportunities through guided instructions (Webb et al., 2019). Students form small instruction groups where the teachers can more closely identify and address their unique needs. In the small groups, students learn strategies, literary components, and specific skills that they apply in their lives and the lives of others.

Students with dis/abilities require an environment that fosters their self-determination through approaches such as co-teaching, when the model is executed effectively, maximizing the knowledge of both teachers and the learning experiences of all students. The co-educators promote choices, self-advocacy, and self-determination in the classroom settings. Moreover, approaches like the gradual release of responsibility and UDL are additional mechanisms to help promote the virtue of self-determination to learners and teachers. Students with unique needs get a chance to thrive and succeed when various learning approaches are incorporated.
Chapter 3

Methodology

An educator’s perception of student ability and student age can be two factors that contribute to the oppression of students with dis/abilities, particularly when thinking about self-determination skills. The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to explore how elementary co-teaching teams perceive the experiences and capabilities of students with dis/abilities in their classroom. This study sought to consider how dynamics such as student age and dis/ability classification contribute to co-teachers’ self-determination construction. CDT and SDT are used as lenses to guide the analysis of data. This research explored how age and dis/ability perceptions influence co-teachers’ construction of self-determination. In this study, co-teachers are defined as a general educator and special educator who teach together and share responsibilities for a portion or the entirety of their workday. Self-determination is the anthology of an individual’s attitudes and ability that acts as a catalyst in an individual’s life, including the ability to make choices independently (Wehmeyer, 2002). This study explored whether perceptions of age and ability impact an educator’s practice relating to self-determining skills for students with dis/abilities.

Ableism includes but is not limited to a negative stigma or connotation directed toward people with disabilities. For individuals with dis/abilities, ableism can be portrayed through stereotypical beliefs, invisibility, lack of inclusiveness, and lack of support (Ostiguy-Finneran & Peters, 2018). Ageism is the discrimination of an individual due to age. The intersection of ageism and ableism may impact a student’s ability to display self-determining skills. This intersectionality may also impact a teacher’s perception of the child with dis/abilities. Therefore, this dissertation explores how co-teaching teams perceive the ability of elementary students with
dis/abilities to utilize self-determination skills (self-advocacy, goal setting, problem solving, and decision making).

**The Research Problem**

The NCLB (2002) requires all students to have access to a curriculum that is of high academic rigor and aligned to state standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which replaced ideals implemented by NCLB, gives states the ability to generate accountability for reaching the diverse needs of all learners and the opportunities to provide more funding and knowledge for special education services. To ensure the integrity of NCLB, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) amendments include a revision in which all students receive instruction within their LRE, which suggests that students with dis/abilities receiving special education services have the opportunity to be integrated with their general education peers, when appropriate, while still being provided specialized instruction to help meet their diverse learning profiles. Hence, in response to this legislation, co-teaching is seen in many schools as adhering to the LRE for some special education students’ educational placement.

Co-teaching is a widely used teaching approach that aims to address the needs of a diverse group of learners, including students with disabilities, following a change in federal legislation. Co-teaching is recognized as the valuable by-product of federal legislation to grant all students access to the same instruction, regardless of their educational needs (Friend et al., 2010; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Through scaffolding and differentiation, students have access to grade-level expectations and rigor. As a part of a student’s schooling experience, the cultivation of self-determination skills should be evidenced, even in the elementary years.

It becomes apparent that self-determining skills are not a priority and, for some students with dis/abilities, may even be nonexistent in the co-taught model, as the structure of the two-
teacher model presently exists. Not allowing students to demonstrate self-determining skills generates an environment that can be dehumanizing for students with dis/abilities, which creates an unjust educational experience. Experiences of students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom may be problematic, as dominant discourse is rooted in the dynamics of ageism and ableism. It is unknown if teacher perceptions of dis/ability, combined with instructional practice, hinder the growth of students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom. In co-teaching classrooms, the intersection of these two oppressive factors—ageism and ableism—can extend into IEP meetings, as participation by students with dis/abilities (although often limited) can help develop self-determination skills. Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of research surrounding the perception of co-teachers’ meaning making as it pertains to students with dis/abilities and the influence on learning for students with dis/abilities. Therefore, this study contributes to co-teaching, elementary education, special education, and disability research. This study also allows for the unveiling of co-teachers’ perspectives and the way that mindsets impact children with dis/abilities in their classrooms. Conscious and subconscious biases surrounding self-determination, as these intersect with students with dis/abilities, are explored. Implications for best practices within the co-taught classroom and how to foster self-determination can be explored.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to explore how elementary co-teaching teams perceive the experiences and capabilities of students with dis/abilities in their classroom. This study sought to understand how dynamics such as student age and dis/ability classification contribute to co-teachers’ construction of self-determination.
Research Questions

This phenomenological study examines co-teachers’ attitudes toward self-determination for students with dis/abilities, asking them about the successful and challenging components of teaching classified students, specifically regarding conscious or subconscious beliefs rooted in ableism or ageism.

1. How do co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms?
   a. What role does grade level play in co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?
   b. How does student dis/ability classification contribute to co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?

2. How do practices in the co-taught classroom reflect understandings of self-determination?
   a. What role does the co-teaching classroom environment play in students’ self-determination development?

Research Paradigm

The purpose of phenomenological research is to “explore what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be understood, and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). Edmund Husserl’s interpretation of phenomenology includes bracketing, the suspension of judgments, and intentionality (Peoples, 2021). Martin Heidegger questioned Husserl’s founding methodological conceptualization. Heidegger argued there was no way to suspend or bracket judgment because one is constantly experiencing the world (Peoples,
A key aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology is recognizing that pre-existing beliefs about a phenomenon play a crucial role in Heidegger’s understanding and formation. Furthermore, it is critical to acknowledge experience with phenomena as a researcher but put these interactions and thoughts aside.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is conducted through empirical (collection of experiences) and reflective (analysis of their meaning) activities. The hermeneutic lens of phenomenology requires abstemious interpretations free from intoxications, discursive language, and the value of the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). Nevertheless, the thinking behind hermeneutic phenomenology can be interpretive. Phenomenology relies heavily on pathos, as there is “nothing more meaningful than the quest for the origin, presentation, and meaning of meaning” (van Manen, 2016, p. 3).

Taking Heidegger’s ideas one step further, one can intertwine the work of van Manen (2016), who transformed current viewpoints of phenomenology to unpack practices of living fully and described this viewpoint as the “phenomenological research and writing that reflects on and in practice and prepares for practice” (p. 5). Through phenomenology of practice, van Manen supposes researchers can unveil the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of actions. Thus, phenomenology becomes a philosophic method not for answering but rather for questioning. However, these questions provide perceptions of existentialism and offer a lens of analysis for a supposed phenomenon:

...lived experience is experience that we live through before we take a reflective view of it. For the researcher, it is important to realize that experience, as we live it from moment to moment, is always more complex, more nuanced, more richly layered than we can
fathom, and meanings emerging from reflecting on lived experience are always
ambiguous, enigmatic, and ultimately unfathomable. (van Manen, 2016, p. 17)
Phenomenology of practice seeks to make meaning of lived experiences in association with a
social phenomenon.

This study conducted a hermeneutic phenomenology of practice with purposive sampling
of 4 co-teaching teams (total of participants). The study examined the perspectives and
instructional practice of elementary co-teachers as pertaining to the self-determination students
with dis/abilities. It is integral to decipher what these co-teaching teams think and do, both as a
collective unit and individually.

**Worldview**

Two epistemological worldviews guide this dissertation: the constructivist and
transformative worldviews. Through constructivism, the intent is to make meaning or interpret
the way others look at the world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Crotty (as cited in Creswell &
Creswell, 2018) noted that humans engage with and make meaning of their world based on
historical and social perspectives as well as the culture of a group of people. Thus,
constructivism aligns with the goal of this hermeneutic phenomenology of practice, as it seeks to
construct educators’ meanings as they engage with the co-taught setting. For this study, the focus
is on how co-teachers construct or make meaning of educational experiences of students with
dis/abilities.

This dissertation also focuses on thinking upheld by the transformative worldview, which
builds on constructivist thoughts concerning societal issues of power, social justice,
discrimination, and action for marginalized peoples (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study’s
axiological assumption is that societal belief rooted in ageist and ableist viewpoints impacts
teachers’ meaning making of self-determination for students with dis/abilities. Exploring co-teachers’ meaning making through the hermeneutic phenomenology of practice infuses the theoretical lenses of CDT and SDT. These frameworks allow for the interpretation of educators’ meaning making and how self-determination is fostered for students with dis/abilities. The chosen theory and method can assist in making sense of whether students in co-taught classrooms are experiencing disabling views due to ability or age that are upheld by teachers. Last, ageist or ableist beliefs upheld by the viewpoints or practices of educators are interpreted to determine if they are encouraging or hindering self-determining skills.

**Participants and Setting**

This study took place on Long Island, where the classification of students with special needs is 13% of students in Nassau County and 16% in Suffolk County (NYSED, 2019). Classified students receive services within districts based on a continuum of special education programs. For this study, the sample included elementary educators (kindergarten through 5th grade) who work within the co-taught setting, where there is a certified general education teacher and special education teacher in the classroom during all core content academic areas. The research study was conducted using participants who have a New York State teaching license, are educators on Long Island, and are a part of a co-teaching team. Teacher participants worked in districts that have an ICT model that calls upon the expertise of both the special education and general education teacher throughout the school day to maximize student learning in the classroom. The sampled teachers held a certificate in either general education or special education in grades K-6. Purposeful sampling procedure was used to ensure that recruited participants fall within this criterion and can provide an in-depth and detailed depiction of self-determination in co-taught classrooms. Since the sampled teachers were educators on Long
Island, it allowed for purposeful data collection and provided results that may be more transferable to the teaching population due to differing school contexts and settings. Participants encompassed a range of years of teaching, degree attainment, and experiences in co-taught classrooms.

**Methods for Data Collection**

The purpose of this phenomenological dissertation was to examine co-teachers’ meaning making as it pertains to self-determination for students with dis/abilities, both individually and as a team. The different components of this dissertation allowed for the analysis of co-teachers in association with their ideals and practice as individual educators and as a co-taught team. Data were collected through three different methods: a semi-structured individual interview (see Appendix A), a co-teaching lesson plan (see Appendix B), and a team interview consisting of the co-teaching partnership (see Appendix C). IRB approval was received in April of 2022 (see Appendix J). During the Spring of 2022, potential participants were emailed and identified. The interviews were spread across two different days, allowing time for analysis and the generation of follow-up questions. The data collection began in May 2022 and was completed by August 2022.

At the time of data analysis, all participants were teaching at the elementary level (Kindergarten through 5th grade) on Long Island within co-taught classrooms. The eight participants had varying amounts of experience in the field of education, ranging from 5 to 36 years. Furthermore, the participants’ experience in the co-taught setting ranged from 3 to 12 years. All participants engaged in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and provided one co-taught lesson plan for the partnership, culminating with a team interview involving both members of the co-teaching duo.
The phenomenological interview series was adapted from Seidman’s (2019) overview of the structure. The primary researcher followed the format outlined below:

- **Interview #1:** Individual interviews were completed with every member of the four co-teaching teams. During this interview, the researcher determined the educator’s life history and background related to co-teaching, teaching students with dis/abilities, and self-determination.

- **Interview #2:** A partner interview with both members of the co-teaching team—the general and special education teachers—was completed to determine the educators’ recent experience. This focus group interview differed from traditional three-series interviews (Seidman, 2019), as it was executed in partnerships rather than with individuals. This allowed for the interpretation of co-teaching dynamics and how the team collaborated to meet the diverse needs of students with dis/abilities. During this interview, participants introspectively deciphered and depicted ageist or ableist viewpoints or practices that impact the self-determination of students with dis/abilities in their classrooms.

For the first phase of data analysis, all participants were interviewed individually. Following the individual interviews, the second phase of data collection consisted of the collection of an artifact from each co-teaching team, a co-taught lesson plan. Within this lesson plan, the researcher looked for opportunities in which the teachers provide opportunities for self-determination. As the third and final phase of data collection, team interviews were conducted. This allowed for a discussion surrounding prevalent themes and the opportunity to further unpack interpretations and practices. The three phases of data collection permitted participants to reflect on their meaning making of self-determination for students with dis/abilities.
Individual Interview #1

The rationale for starting data collection through individual interviews with each member of the co-taught team was to gain a sense of the educator’s background in education and perceptions of the co-taught classroom, including students with dis/abilities. The individual interviews took place remotely through Zoom. The interviews were structured to take place during an educator’s prep period and did not last longer than 45 minutes. The virtual format of the interview was contingent on unprecedented circumstances and district restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in association with the availability of both the primary researcher and participant. The interviews began by reminding the participants of the voluntary nature of this study, introducing myself as a fellow educator and researcher, and summarizing the pertinent information of this dissertation. Participants were asked for consent to record the interview and were reminded of their ability to conclude the interview at any time. During the interviews, participants engaged in a series of open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview guide. The purpose of the first individual interview was to explore the meaning making of students with dis/abilities, co-teaching, and self-determination of each participant. The transcript of these individual interviews provided a basis for analysis and initial discussion in team interviews.

Co-Taught Lesson Plan

The second stage of the data collection involved a co-taught lesson plan to better understand the co-teaching dynamic, relationship, and how the partnership cultivates opportunities for self-determination in the classroom. The lesson plans allowed for the primary researcher to gain a sense of the classroom regarding the balance of co-teachers and the instructional opportunities for students with dis/abilities. The collaborative practices within the classroom and model of co-teaching utilized during the co-taught lesson plan allowed for the
interpretation of practice. The way both educators speak and act in the classroom shed insight to practice, which promotes or hinders self-determination. The lesson plan provided a snapshot of co-teachers’ collaborative practices, allowing trends to emerge across the team participants.

Focus Groups (Team Interviews)

Following the collection, interpretation, and synthesis of data from the initial two phases, co-teaching teams engaged in a team interview. This was conducted during the teachers’ prep period virtually due to the participants’ availability and the nationwide pandemic. This team interview was designed to see if co-teaching teams value self-determination for students with dis/abilities as a collective unit and to follow up on any trends that emerged during previous stages of the study. The team interviews were vital for hermeneutic, phenomenological analysis, as this serves as a way for the researcher to clarify preconceptions and have an opportunity to revise current understandings (Peoples, 2021).

Data Analysis

This qualitative data allowed for an in-depth thematic analysis. Data analysis followed the protocol as proposed by Katarzyna Peoples (2021), who suggested first reading the entire transcript while taking out any unnecessary language. A verbatim transcription of the recorded phenomenological interview series occurred using in vivo coding, an analysis of the participants’ words to deepen understanding of the potential phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). The transcriptions of these interviews were uploaded into Dedoose, a program constructed to analyze and interpret qualitative data. The co-taught lesson plans and field notes from observations were uploaded into the computer program as well.

For the first round of coding, the generation of preliminary units, a piece of data that reveals a feature or trait of the investigated phenomenon based upon the in vivo data sets was
conducted. The primary researcher created a code for the findings: “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 3). Codes were not just labels but rather a means to link data. The second round entailed value coding, the “application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldana, 2016, p. 31). Value coding allowed for the interpretation and thematic connections surrounding attitudes of co-teachers.

Dedoose was then used to infuse codes found in the first in vivo coding and second value coding. The researcher analyzed the data set, looking for trends and identifying categories and themes. Furthermore, quotes or experiences that alluded to the theoretical framework were identified. More specifically, information that pertained to ableism, ageism, self-determination, and any additional themes that may emerge from the triangulated data set were highlighted. The construction of themes for each interview, synthesis of themes across all interviews, and the integration of all major themes allowed for a comprehensive general description of the data.

**Researcher’s Positionality**

Positionality impacts all phases of the research process, as positionality is the stance of the researcher in association with the context—both political and social—of the study (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This primary researcher has been a special education teacher for eight years in various educational settings, including a conglomeration of a self-contained and resource room classroom for two years and the integrated co-taught model for six years, with three different co-teachers. Currently, the researcher is an instructional coordinator at an elementary school in a Long Island school district. At the particular school where the primary
researcher works, there are four co-taught classrooms, and part of her role is to unpack instructional strategies to help meet the needs of diverse learners in the classroom.

This study was conducted because the researcher is passionate about the co-taught classroom. Her belief is that the co-taught model, when done effectively, can truly transform the educational experience of the learners in the classroom. During the study, the researcher triangulated data analysis through individual interviews, co-taught lesson plan artifacts, and team interviews. Field notes were completed after each interview to summarize participants’ understandings and recognize any judgments held by the research, an essential component of hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 2011).

**Strategies to Ensure Validity and Reliability**

The triangulation of data collection occurred through the individual interview, a co-taught lesson plan, and team interview. This enhanced the validity of the study. This research incorporated interviews that are at least three days apart, therefore allotting for one to three weeks. This structure allowed the researcher to check for the internal consistency of comments (Seidman, 2019). Furthermore, through interviewing and analyzing a document from four co-teaching teams, or eight participants, connections can be drawn and established amongst participants. This study aims to enhance the validity and reliability of phenomenological research by exploring how participants make meaning and interpret both themselves and the researcher.

**Predicting Ethical Issues**

Positional reflexivity is how a researcher positions the world and further articulates such interpretations and experiences (Vagle, 2018). Beliefs, practices, and judgments of a researcher are essential to note. Since hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the importance of acknowledging pre-existing experiences associated with the proposed phenomena, it assumes
that researchers will have preconceived biases. Therefore, researchers must be mindful to not let their own biases affect the collection and analysis of data, and they must acknowledge their own biases in the research process.

The relationship between the participating co-teaching teams and myself, the researcher, may not be a valid give and take. This unbalanced reciprocity can lead to complicated outlooks and ethical considerations of the study. Since the interviewing relationship is grounded in two social issues—ability and age—reciprocity can become more complex. Rowan (as cited in Seidman, 2019) considered components of qualitative research to cause alienation or isolation for participants, because participants are being separated from their words, which are then used to the researcher’s advantage. It is critical for researchers to demonstrate reciprocity by honoring the words and actions of participants when presenting experiences to a larger group (Seidman, 2019).

Limitations

The timeline for data collection does not last longer than 2 to 3 months, which may impact the researcher’s ability to depict and gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. A subsequent longitudinal study could be considered to gain future insights. Due to unprecedented circumstances, and the constantly changing guidelines pertaining to visitors within schools due to COVID-19, an in-person classroom observation was not a part of the methods, but this is something that should be considered in future research. The study sought to determine if ableist and ageist ideas are prevalent in the co-taught classroom and whether these viewpoints hinder self-determination opportunities for students with dis/abilities, by making meaning of the co-teachers’ experiences. One limitation and implication for future studies would be to gain insight from the students.
In choosing to work across the elementary band, including Kindergarten through fifth grade, the range of student age can potentially be an obstacle in generating themes in the data. In addition, there may be differences in teachers’ perspectives of students with dis/abilities based on the student’s age, simply due to developmental milestones and expectations or the student at a particular grade level. Similarly, a limitation of the research is that the findings may not be generalizable to all teachers of special education students, since it seeks to only make meaning of teachers within the co-taught model. Furthermore, since only one team of co-teachers per grade level is participating in the study, findings may not be evident of all co-teaching teams perceptions at a particular grade level. All participants have varying experiences in association to the length of teaching experience in co-taught classrooms, which may also be a limiting factor in the research.

**Impact and Significance of Study**

This study allowed for implications and suggestions to revise current practice within co-taught classrooms. In addition, this study unveiled co-teachers’ perceptions of students with dis/abilities in inclusive educational settings. From the findings, educators may continue to explore and value opportunities to foster self-determination skills for students with dis/abilities. This study will add to the field of disability justice, as it will encourage adults to challenge the status quo and the treatment of children with dis/abilities.

This study is needed because there is an apparent gap in special education literature. Students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms need to have opportunities to develop and cultivate self-determining skills, perhaps even through involvement in the IEP process.
Conclusion

This chapter discussed the method and designs utilized. The purpose of this phenomenological research was to determine if ableist and ageist beliefs of co-teachers influence the self-determination of students with dis/abilities. The design and methods created an opportunity to make meaning of co-teachers’ perceptions and practices associated with self-determination for students with dis/abilities. The methods of this research are grounded in the transformative worldview, which aligns with hermeneutic research designed to make meaning of societal constructs of oppression that influence students with dis/abilities. The construction of meaning making surrounding experiences of co-teachers used different sources and triangulation: an individual interview, a co-taught lesson plan, and a team interview. Ultimately, through the methodology, the researcher was able to understand the co-teachers’ lived experiences and how perceptions and practice impact self-determining skills of students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom.
Chapter 4

Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Elementary co-teachers, meaning making of a student with dis/abilities, and self-determination need to be explored, as it is hypothesized that ableist beliefs and presumptions may infiltrate our school system via teacher beliefs. This may hinder opportunities for self-determination for students with dis/abilities. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of elementary co-teachers. This study uncovered themes that dismantles ableist and ageist thinking and enhances the educational experience, particularly about self-determination, for students with dis/abilities.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the overarching question, “How do elementary co-teaching teams perceive and foster self-determination skills for students with dis/abilities in their classroom?” Sub-questions included the following:

1. How do co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms?
   a. What role does grade level play in co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?
   b. How does student dis/ability classification contribute to co-teachers’ meaning making of self-determination?

2. How do practices in the co-taught classroom reflect understandings of self-determination?
   a. What role does the co-teaching classroom environment play in students’ self-determination development?
This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the current study, along with findings that highlight the experiences of elementary co-teaching teams in their cultivation of self-determination environments in their classrooms. A hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was used to examine participants’ lived experiences and resulted in the generation of themes related to the perception of the co-teaching process and experience for students with dis/abilities. The themes in phenomenological research are not generalizations but the interpretation of each co-teacher’s individual experiences, woven together to form a complete understanding of the phenomenon. Using hermeneutic phenomenology of practice (as described by Heidegger, 2011; van Manen, 2016), this research does not aim to provide definitive answers about the co-teaching model but to critically examine the practice, the co-taught classroom, and the impact of teacher perspectives on students with dis/abilities.

**Participant Demographics**

The participants in this study were a collection of educators representing different school districts on Long Island. Participants’ educational experience ranged from 5 to 36 years. More specifically, the participants’ experience in the co-taught model ranged from 3 to 12 years (Appendix D identifies the individual characteristics of each participant). Each of the four co-teaching teams is identified using a letter, A, B, C, or D. None of the co-teaching teams were in their first year working together, and their experiences as partners in the co-taught model ranged from three to seven years (Appendix E shows the demographics of each co-teaching team). It is critical to note that all co-teaching teams had students that were classified as either other health impairment, learning disability, or speech or language impairment. All information about the team and participants is based on their experience during the onset of data collection.
Co-teaching Teams

Co-teaching Team A consisted of Participants 1 and 2. At the time of data collection, Team A worked in a 5th-grade classroom, where 5 out of 23 learners were identified as students with dis/abilities. Co-teaching Team A had been working together for seven years. Participant 1 was a female adult who had 36 years of experience in education, 12 of which were in the co-taught model. In the co-teaching partnership, she was the special education teacher. Her general education counterpart was Participant 2, who was also female but had 22 years of experience in education, 10 of which were in the co-taught model.

Participants 3 and 4 made up co-teaching Team B. When interviewed, Participants 3 and 4 were co-teaching 23 Kindergarten students; six of the learners in this classroom had IEPs. This was Team B’s fifth year of teaching together. Participant 3 was a female with five years of experience in the co-taught setting but 14 years of experience in the field of education. She was the general education teacher. Her special education partner, Participant 4, had worked in education for seven years, and it, too, was her fifth year in the co-taught model.

Participants 5 and 6 compromised Team C. This co-teaching team had worked together for three years. They worked in a 3rd-grade classroom where 7 of 15 learners were classified. Participant 5 was a female and a special education teacher with 17 years of experience in education, 6 of which were in the co-taught setting. Participant 6 was the only male in this study and was the general education teacher in this co-teaching partnership. He had 4 years of experience in co-teaching but had been in the field of education for 13 years.

Team D included Participants 7 and 8. At the time of the study, they worked in a 5th-grade classroom where 12 of the 26 students were identified as students with dis/abilities. They had been co-teaching together for three years. Participant 7 was a female with five years of
experience in education, three of which had been within the co-taught model. She was the special education teacher. Participant 8 was also female and the general education teacher of the pair. She had five years of teaching experience, all of which had been in a co-taught classroom. The demographics of each participant and the characteristics of each co-teaching team are imperative to identify.

Findings

The findings of this study addressed the research problem of co-teachers’ perspectives and how educators’ mindsets influenced the experiences of students with dis/abilities in their classrooms, specifically associated with self-determination. Inductive coding was conducted during the analysis of data. An in vivo coding scheme was used for the primary coding cycle, while value coding was used for the secondary coding cycle. The primary cycle of coding yielded 38 codes. The codes were organized into 10 categories for the secondary cycle of coding (the categories are listed in Appendix F). From these 10 categories, 4 themes emerged that cut across all research questions: (1) educators’ mindset toward co-teaching impacts students with dis/abilities, (2) perceptions of inclusion for students with dis/abilities are (subconsciously) ableist, (3) self-determination is contingent on age, and (4) UDL is an underutilized framework for instruction. In addition to the four themes, it was interesting to examine how self-determination was conceptualized by the participants.

The participants in this study had diverse definitions of self-determination that overlapped yet varied in a multitude of ways. When the researcher examined and interpreted the study’s findings, it was important to understand their conceptualization of self-determination. In their definitions, all participants identified self-determination as a drive or determination. Participants’ definitions individually and as a collective unit paralleled the Shogren et al. (2017)
definition, which states self-determination as having the necessary skills, knowledge, and opportunities to drive one’s life in a self-regulated and directed way, ultimately leading to satisfaction. Through elaboration, participants added that the drive would be toward achieving a goal. The responses did not provide the origin of the motivation for the drive, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. In sum, self-determination for participants was the drive, determination, and motivation to persevere and accomplish a goal. This definition may be useful in providing context to the four themes that emerged in the study.

**Educators’ Mindset Toward Co-Teaching Impacts Students with Dis/Abilities**

The first finding of this study focused on how the mindsets of participants related to co-teaching impacted their perception of students with dis/abilities. Finding #1 addressed the overarching research question: How do elementary co-teaching teams perceive and foster self-determination skills for students with dis/abilities in their classroom? Teachers’ preparation and training was an important factor in how it influenced both co-teacher relationships and practices. It also served as a basis for their constructs and pedagogical practices affiliated with students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom. This directly affected co-teachers’ meaning making of opportunities for self-determination. The mindset of co-teachers made a difference in how they approached instructional choices and practices for students with dis/abilities. If their view about co-teaching favored the general education teacher as dominant, it resulted in their minimization of effectively using a two-teach model and providing differentiated opportunities for students. At times, these viewpoints hindered the importance of the two-teacher model and opportunities for scaffolding and differentiation. This finding addresses the overarching question of this study, seeking to make meaning of how co-teaching teams perceive and foster self-determination for students with dis/abilities. Opportunities to foster self-determination for
students with dis/abilities were directly connected to the two teachers in the co-taught model: interpersonal feelings between co-teachers, self-efficacy, and training surrounding instruction for students with dis/abilities.

**Individual level.** Participants revealed views about the benefits and weaknesses of using a co-taught model. All eight participating co-teachers unanimously identified the importance of positive relationships as a propeller for a successful co-teaching team. Participant 1 reflected on the importance of the relationship between co-teachers, which is collaborative and cohesive. She communicated,

Some people are asked to be co-teachers. They don’t request to be teachers. There’s a huge difference. So, when you request to be a co-teacher, you automatically know it’s no longer I. It is always we; it’s not mine—it is ours.

This quote highlighted the importance of a shared mindset and attitude in co-teaching. It emphasized the idea that co-teaching is not just two individuals working together, but rather a collaborative effort where both teachers are equally invested in the success of their students. The phrase, “It’s no longer I. It is always we,” accentuated the importance of teamwork and the need for both teachers to work together as a unit rather than as individuals. Participant 1 emphasized the responsibility of teaching is shared and not one person’s alone. Adopting the “we” mentality can lead to a more effective and cohesive co-teaching experience for teachers and students (King-Sears et al., 2021; Walther-Thomas, 1997).

In the semi-structured interview protocol, one question asked all eight participants to imagine speaking with a parent who had no experience with the co-taught model. Their statements to this hypothetical parent generated an understanding of feelings toward the co-taught classroom environment. All eight participants recited answers that emphasized the
positive learning experiences due to the two-teacher structure that all students would have in the co-taught setting.

Participant 1 emphasized a strength of the co-taught model rooted in more opportunities for differentiation and teacher attention. Participant 2 highlighted the smaller student-to-teacher ratio that transpires in the co-taught classroom, echoed by Participant 3. Participant 4 emphasized the importance of the team mentality in the co-taught classroom. Participant 5 noted the full-day model, an interpretation of the two-teach structure in which both teachers are with the students in the same classroom for the entirety of the school day, as the most effective implementation of co-teaching to benefit all learners and the two educators sharing space and students. All participants at different points throughout the data-collection process echoed this sentiment, stating that the most effective way to co-teach is to have common planning time and to adopt the full-day model (Friend et al., 2010; Karten & Murawski, 2020). Participant 6 spoke about the structure of the co-taught model and how the smaller student-to-teacher ratio helps to enhance instruction and opportunities for all students in the classroom. Participant 7, similarly to the previously interviewed participants, accentuated the tremendous benefits of the co-taught classroom. Participant 8 identified the continual and heightened support received in her answer. Although the answers to the question outlining the experience a child could and would have in the co-taught classroom were grounded in asset-based thinking, it is essential to identify these positive components of the co-taught model but also what hinders the model in the views of participants as the interview process continued.

The most prevalent positives of the co-taught model discussed by participants were the opportunities to collaborate and learn from another professional and the benefit of the model for all learners due to differentiation, scaffolding, and the reduced student-to-teacher ratio that
increases the level of student support. The dominant negatives toward the model were ensuring that both co-teachers are seen as equals by all members of the school community, the feeling of constantly having to rely on someone, the challenges of student behavior, and the con of co-teaching if you are paired with someone who is not a good match.

In their individual interviews, all participants highlighted the importance of a positive relationship leading to “seamless” instruction and resulting in student success. However, three participants also shared negative experiences in the co-taught model. These perceptions indicated that co-instruction and opportunities for learners in the co-taught classroom are heavily influenced by the relationship between co-teachers. Having an understanding of the co-teaching model being implemented is also important. The strengths and weaknesses of co-teaching identified in this study are consistent with the literature. Participants believed in the tremendous benefit of the co-taught classroom and that although it is a popular service model, it could also address educational inequities within the classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend & Bursuck, 2011).

Team level. In addition to the discussion in the individual interview, the co-teaching lesson plan artifact and the team interview allowed the researcher to understand the co-teaching dyad and their practices, ultimately grounding analysis in the participants’ perspectives toward co-teaching and how this adversely affects the self-determination of students with dis/abilities. Educators must move beyond the one-teach, one-assist format of co-teaching toward more collaborative pedagogical structures, including team teaching, parallel teaching, and station teaching (Lochner et al., 2019). All four co-teaching teams noted the impact of the nationwide pandemic on their co-teaching practice and how they have attempted to realign their practice in small-group instruction and what is known to be best practice. Understanding how co-teaching
teams view their delineated roles in the co-taught setting, whether working under their special education or general education license, is paramount regarding how students with dis/abilities are treated in the classroom. Within the team interview, co-teaching teams were asked to reflect on their roles in the co-taught classroom, and explicit responses from each participant can be found in Appendix G.

In both Teams A and B, it became apparent that the general education teacher is viewed as dominant, the teacher in charge. Co-teaching can sometimes lead to a feeling of underutilization among special education teachers, who may feel like an extension to the general education teacher. The general education teacher may take on the role of content specialist, while the special education teacher may at times, be relegated to a role similar to that of an aide (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). This uneven distribution of responsibilities can create an authority structure in the classroom with the general education teacher in the dominant role, which can weaken the partnership and even lead to the dissolution of the co-teaching relationship (Bessette, 2008). In the co-taught model, if the special education teacher feels that their role is to simply add on to what the general education teacher is saying, and the general education teacher sees their role as planning and leading the lessons, taking the lead on the curriculum and doing what the district requires, it could negatively impact the self-determining skills of students with dis/abilities, as this may not take into account the specific needs of the individual. It may limit the opportunities for students with dis/abilities to be active participants in their learning, making choices and decisions, setting goals, and advocating for themselves. In a co-taught model, it is important for both the special education teacher and the general education teacher to cooperate and work together to ensure that students with dis/abilities have opportunities to develop their self-determining skills. Without effective collaboration, co-teaching teams may not utilize the best
methods and models, which can negatively impact student performance. To be successful and promote student growth, co-teaching teams need to work together collaboratively.

In both Teams C and D, there was more of a team and collaborative approach to co-teaching. The general and special education teachers felt it necessary to be involved in all facets of the model, whether general or special education. To encompass this thinking, Participant 8 reflected on her role, stating,

I was going to say what he said, but again, the model in our room is very seamless. You could walk in and not be able to decipher who is the current teacher and who is the special ed teacher. But my role would be more to differentiate, to modify, to put in any graphic organizers during writing or any additional hands-on, you know, hands-on manipulatives for math, like things of that nature. But again, we kind of both do both of those.

This approach allowed both teachers to meet the unique needs of students with dis/abilities and provide them with the support they need to access the curriculum and be successful in their learning. They provided different ways to present the same information (i.e., the use of graphic organizers, manipulatives, and hands-on tools) that in turn positively affected students with dis/abilities since they were given the opportunity to learn in a way that works best for them.

Through the use of multiple modalities, there may be an increase in students’ motivation and engagement, which in turn can help them to take ownership of their learning and develop their self-determination skills. Since the special education teacher and the general education teacher worked together seamlessly, it can create a classroom culture in which all students feel valued and included. This helps promote positive relationships between the teachers and students, which can further support the development of self-determination skills. Self-determination is a complex
and ongoing process influenced by many factors, such as individual characteristics, social interactions, and the learning environment. Therefore, a co-taught model that focuses on differentiation and modification can be a positive step in supporting the development of self-determination for students with disabilities.

Although it was not immediately clear from examining the lesson plan what co-teaching model Team A used (the lesson plan can be found in Appendix H), it became apparent in the conversation that instruction was dictated by the general education teacher. Although both members of the team indicated that their professional relationship was positive, the general education teacher made most of the decisions related to pedagogy. When asked what co-teaching model they use most frequently, the general education participant of Team A stated,

I feel as though we would have to split into two groups and the special education teacher would take her kids and I would take some of the other kids and we would really do things in group to help students learn best. Whereas for reading and writing, it was more whole group and the special education teacher would just help students one on one.

This statement points to unbalanced roles in this co-taught classroom in that special education students are supported solely by the special education teacher. This, in their opinion, is the co-taught structure and model they found to benefit and impact students. At the time of this study, both members of Team A had not received any district training or professional development in co-teaching.

Team B participants spoke more about the role that collaboration played in their co-teaching practices. The general educator noted, “I mean, I know we have certain roles, but I kind of feel like we all do a little bit of everything.” The special educator elaborated, “Their IEP progress reports, that is one of my main roles she didn’t really touch unless I asked her how to
word something.” Although the team emphasized the importance of collaboration in their working relationship, there is a clear-cut delineation of roles and who does what to be successful in their co-taught classroom. Participant 2, the special education teacher, worked predominantly with the struggling and special education population of students to support what the general education has decided.

In their co-taught lesson plan, Participants 5 and 6 used the team-teaching method to engage students in a mini lesson about character traits. The explicit team-teaching instruction was followed by station teaching. Students were divided into three stations where “Each group is working on a different level of applying the skill of character change by using various strategies based on previous lessons, IEP goals and classroom performance.” Teachers spoke to the importance of scaffolds, which led to the “gradual release of assistance, providing students with the opportunity to develop the concept independently…” This team accentuated the gradual release of responsibility as an influential way to instruct students with dis/abilities. The co-taught lesson plan noted there are two teachers in the classroom and outlined what each of the teacher’s roles was throughout the implementation of the lesson. This was the only team in the study that acknowledged a connection between students’ IEP goals and lesson objectives. When asked what co-teaching model they predominately utilize, Team C answered station teaching. Team C valued the collaborative, team approach and did not differentiate students based on their dis/ability classification or lack thereof. They shared that their most influential lessons extend beyond academics and into life skills, allowing students to strengthen their character.

Team D presented as a united front, noting that although it may not fall under their official title, they share responsibilities in their classroom environment to meet the needs of all learners. This team communicated that they use team teaching and station teaching most
frequently. They emphasized that they rarely, if ever, use the one-teach, one-assist, or observe co-teaching models. They added that their most impactful lessons transpired when students engaged in opportunities that felt applicable to real life. Team D stated that their lesson plan includes the following:

…necessary modifications, accommodations, and enrichment, to ensure we are addressing the needs of all of our students based upon our knowledge of them, their needs, and their IEPs. We plan on continuing to provide a positive, welcoming, and organized learning environment for our students. Additionally, we utilized technological resources and other engaging aspects in all of our lessons to ensure our students are reaching their full potential.

Team D’s lesson plan can be referenced in Appendix I. Collaboration was emphasized and fostered in Team D’s co-teaching partnership. It is interesting to note that in Teams C and D, the general education teacher is dually certified, meaning they also hold their special education degree, whereas this is not the case for the general education teachers in Teams A and B. The role of this dual certification provided a positive impact on the understanding of the roles and responsibilities in the co-taught classroom. This dynamic played a pivotal role in co-teachers being able to create an optimal education that meets the needs of students in their classrooms (Jacob & Lloydhauser, 2022). Dual certification contributed to some other benefits described by teams C and D:

- Both members of the co-taught team felt ownership over students’ IEPs, including but not limited to goal tracking and IEP progress reports
- More familiarity with the co-teaching structures and models
- Flexibility in who works with what student
● More open, honest communication

● See students as capable of achieving the same expectations as their general education peers, as long as they are provided with appropriate modifications and scaffolds

● See the co-taught environment as something that is a “we” (as opposed to “I”) and the students are all “ours” (not just “mine,” contingent on special or general education)

Participant 6 highlighted the cohesiveness of her partnership as a strength of co-teaching; she identified that she and her counterpart “plan everything together; we teach everything together. You wouldn’t know which one of us is the special teacher. We work with all the students” (Participant 7). This fluidity in teacher roles and the co-teaching model positively impacts students in the two-teach classroom. This mindset and view toward co-teaching had a positive effect on self-determination for students with dis/abilities.

**Perceptions of Inclusion for Students with Dis/Abilities Are (Subconsciously) Ableist**

The second finding was that perceptions of inclusion for students with dis/abilities are ableist, which means educators—whether consciously or subconsciously—are impacting the experience of students in their classroom. Finding #2 addressed Research Question 1, which asked: How do co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms? In Research Question 1b, dis/ability classification is pondered. This research found that the push and pull between deficit and asset-based thinking grounded in independent or intersecting ableist or ageist beliefs led to contradicting perceptions of students with dis/abilities. The conscious and subconscious biases of co-teachers impacted opportunities for students with dis/abilities at the elementary age in the inclusive setting.

It is important to understand ableism before beginning a thorough exploration through self-determination for students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom. Since ableism is
systemic, teachers who may have inclusive mindsets may express automatic ableist responses without being aware. In education, ableist mindsets and practices can exist outside of ableist-minded people in a number of ways, whether it be through curricula and instructional materials, or classroom and school culture. It is important to recognize that these ableist actions are not necessarily done with malicious intent but are often the result of a lack of understanding or education on the topic of ableism and inclusive education. However, the impact on students with dis/abilities can be significant, as it can limit their opportunities for self-determination and full participation in the classroom. To address this, it is important for educators to be aware of their own implicit biases and to actively work on dismantling them.

The similarities and differences in mindsets between the general and special education teachers allow for further interpretation of the phenomenon. This theme allows the researcher to address Research Question 1—specifically 1b—as this question seeks to determine how dis/ability classifications impact opportunities for self-determination in the co-taught classroom.

**Individual level.** Each participant’s definition of inclusion allowed for the interpretation of where students with dis/abilities fit in the inclusive co-taught model and if the co-teaching partnership aligned with their thinking. Team A unlocked the concept of students’ dis/abilities as the same so that it would be hard to identify who “they” are if walking into their classrooms. However, when asked to elaborate and include dis/ability category in this thinking, Participant 2 continued with the notion of sameness, whereas her general education counterpart wavered. Participant 2 provided an example of how a student’s day can be impacted by their dis/ability, “By 2:00, I have a student who’s climbing up the walls…Any medication that he might have been on is wearing off. Any focus that they had is spent. So, I feel like that’s where the disability comes out full-fledged because they can’t hold it anymore.” Participant 2 also recognized
dis/ability classification as a means to assist her in building effective instruction and support. The special education teacher in this team does not see much difference in instructional practice due to classification, whereas her general education counterpart does. This is ironic, since previous discussions with this team recognized that the special educator is the one to work predominantly with students with dis/abilities in this classroom.

Participant 1 identified that the co-taught model propelled learning for students with dis/abilities because “they get to hear the conversation of the quote, unquote typical student.” Without perhaps even recognizing it, the participant identified the biases grounded in the deficits of students with dis/abilities and the oppression of this marginalized group. This further emphasized the power of the “typical” student and the need for students with dis/abilities to assimilate and strive for the idea of being the same. Participant 2, the special educator, agreed with her general education counterpart when she said the inclusive nature of co-teaching not only benefits “my special education children; it benefits everybody.” The simple word choice in “my,” rather than “our” brings to fruition the imbalance relationship amongst the co-teaching pair, which allows for meaning making dominated by ableist beliefs that special education students should be addressed predominantly by the special educator and have an abundant mentality of “they” can learn from the “typical” student. What would be an equitable and just education is not providing students with the same but rather what they need as individuals to be successful in their LRE.

Participant 4, the special educator in Team B, stated inclusion is “when special education kids have the opportunity to come into the general education room to engage in learning with their general education peers and have access to the general education curriculum. This often is done with the support of two teachers.” Although inclusion is a movement that has transcended
education and seeks to ensure students are instructed within their LRE, how educators with arguably the best intentions often define *inclusion* is rooted in ableism. Take, for instance, the previous quote by Participant 4; she articulated inclusion as an opportunity for special education students to go to an environment they otherwise would not see, the classroom of the “superior,” or the general education classroom. The term *special education kids* can be considered ableist, perpetuating the idea that children with dis/abilities are fundamentally different from their non-disabled peers. It implies that they require special treatment or that their abilities and needs differ fundamentally from other students. This can contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of students with dis/abilities, reinforcing the idea that they are not as capable as their general education peers.

The general education teacher of Partner 4, Participant 3, recognized the inclusive structure of co-teaching as a benefit for all students unless the classified student is behavioral. This linked back to previous findings surrounding proper teacher preparation for all dis/ability classification in co-taught settings. Participant 4 noted no differences in expectations due to dis/ability category, identifying she would “hold all students to the same expectation, but adjust if needed.” Participant 3 agreed with this statement. Participants 3 and 4, however, articulated an apparent power balance in their co-taught classroom setting; the general education teacher makes most instructional decisions with the support of the special educator, when necessary. This is not an uncommon way for co-taught classrooms to function. Perhaps the most intriguing component of this to analyze is whether or not the dominance of the general education teacher is due to societal oppressions of special education, therefore stigmatizing students with dis/abilities and devaluing the integral role of the special educator.
The general education teacher in Team C, Participant 6, recognized inclusion in the co-taught structure as a way to “mainstream students with disabilities into a general education setting who do not require intensive support that can handle the course load of their general education peers and require additional support with their academic tasks.” Participant 6 recognized the LRE as a propeller behind co-teaching. However, the subconscious “us” versus “them” divide between general and special education students, again rooted in a lessening, bringing to head ableist thinking, was resurrected.

Participant 5 extended, “I think inclusion is just including everyone and being able to teach them at the same time.” Participants 5 and 6 identified that high rigor and holding all students to the same standard is an important component surrounding expectations in their co-taught classroom. This teaching team challenged all students in their classroom to their maximum potential, regardless of classification. Participant 6 clearly stated this fluidity in expectations for all learners when she noted on behalf of the team, “We want all of our students to be held to the same high standards. But that being said, based on their based-on ability levels, goals may look different.” The language both members of this team utilized is essential to recognize: “We” is prioritized rather than “I,” again emphasizing the collaborative mindset of the team.

When asked in their interviews how student dis/ability classification impacts learning, co-teaching Team C identified the importance of student individuality. Participant 6 highlighted, “I think it has a lot to do with the individual student regardless of their dis/ability…It has a lot to do with their drive and how much they want to work.” Although there are evident subconscious biases perhaps engrained within the meaning making of special education for both participants,
they believe in the inclusive co-teaching model to enhance the learning experience of all students in their classroom.

Participants 7 and 8 agreed that the co-taught environment’s inclusive nature benefited the general and special education student body. Participant 7 elaborated,

It allows the students…even though they might have weaknesses in certain areas…it’ll still allow them to be with their general education peers. So, I feel like it’s a way inclusion is a really great program to, like, build their confidence, because they’re still doing the same thing as the rest of the classes, but they’re just getting supports in order to get there.

Participant 8 shared a similar mindset when she answered, “Everyone being included together and being on the same. Like not feeling different and just feeling like that…we’re all part of the same thing.” Later in the conversation, she spoke to how the co-taught setting allows students to learn from one another. Participant 8 added,

And I feel like that they’re able to grow and learn from different people and not even realize that like, oh, like this person’s different than you are. This person has, you know, special-needs services. Like, they don’t know, and they’re all learning from each other.

Team D recognized not dis/ability classification but rather students’ individual performance and information on their IEP as factors that influence self-determining skills.

**Team level.** During the team interviews, Teams A, B, and C mentioned that the students in their classrooms were unaware of themselves or other students with an IEP. Participants 1-6 mentioned, to varying degrees, that sometimes, students realized what is difficult for them and that they understand when they have mastered something. Otherwise, students did not know who is and is not classified. This mindset would impact students with dis/abilities because it suggests
that the co-teachers do not believe that it is significant for elementary students to be aware that they are receiving special education services. This concealment of classification could potentially impact students with dis/abilities by making them feel different or isolated from their peers. It could also perpetuate ableist thinking by not addressing the importance of individualized accommodations and support for students with dis/abilities (Iannaci, 2018).

It was compelling to interpret the principles of inclusivity through the co-taught lesson plan. Team A submitted a lesson plan with only one name as the heading, the general education teacher. There is no acknowledgment of her special education counterpart throughout this lesson plan. This suggests that the contributions and expertise of the special education co-teacher are not valued or considered important. Inclusive education requires the active participation and collaboration of all educators in the classroom, including co-teachers with specialized training and experience working with students with dis/abilities. When a co-teacher is not acknowledged in a lesson plan, it implies that the students with dis/abilities they work with are not seen as integral members of the class and their needs are not considered in the planning and execution of the lesson. Parity amongst co-teachers is essential, as both the general education and special education teachers need to feel respected and valued (Conderman et al., 2008). In addition, not acknowledging a co-teacher in a lesson plan can send a message to the students with dis/abilities and their peers that their presence and contributions are not valued and that they are not fully included in the classroom community. This can perpetuate harmful ableist attitudes and undermine the goal of inclusive education. Thankfully, the omission of the special education teacher in the lesson plan was only found in one of the four co-teaching partnerships.

Teams B, C, and D submitted lesson plans where both teachers were identified and “we” was the pronoun utilized rather than “I” throughout the artifact. This alluded to an inclusive
structure of the classroom, because it showed that both teachers are working together and collaborating to create the lesson plan. This can signal to students that the classroom is a collaborative environment where all voices and perspectives are valued (Walther-Thomas, 1997). In addition, using “we” instead of “I” conveyed the intent that both teachers are responsible for the instruction and success of all students in the classroom, including those with dis/abilities. This can help to promote a sense of shared responsibility and inclusivity among all members of the class.

Team C is the only team that included the student’s IEP goals aligned with the learning target in the lesson plan. It is important for individual students’ IEP goals to be identified in the lesson plan of co-teachers, as this ensures that the needs and accommodations of students with dis/abilities are being met. By omitting this information in the lesson plan, it perpetuates ableist thinking due to a lack of consideration and accommodation for the needs of students with dis/abilities. This may result in students with dis/abilities not being able to fully access the learning material and participate in the class on an equal level as their peers, ultimately leading to a lack of inclusion and equity for these students. This can perpetuate the marginalization and discrimination of students with disabilities and reinforce societal ableism.

**Self-Determination Capability is Contingent on Age**

The third finding was how age is a factor in the meaning making of self-determination. Similar to the second finding, this addressed Research Question 1. Research Question 1a focused on student grade level and age. This third finding suggested that participants viewed self-determination to be contingent on age. Furthermore, the meaning making of co-teachers surrounding the construct of self-determination is influenced by the age of the child.
As previously noted in this chapter, there is not one definitive definition of self-determination. Fusing together the thoughts and ideas of all participants in this study, self-determination can be defined as the drive, determination, and motivation to persevere and accomplish a goal. But viewpoints surrounding self-determination do not just end there. This theme allowed the researcher to construct meaning surrounding the first research question, “How do co-teachers make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities in elementary classrooms?”—specifically Research Question 1a, which addresses the impact of grade level on self-determination. What materialized is that self-determination was perceived to increase with age and, more specifically, these skills must be cultivated by a mentor, often a parent or teacher.

**Individual level.** Participant 1 identified, “You know, as you get older, obviously you’re more mature, so you’re more cognizant of your things that you need to work on and things that you do well.” She correlated the idea of maturity to self-determination—something that strengthens as you get older and, within her logic, more mature. She elaborated to recognize that self-determination is an internal drive, and as educators, it is essential to “find out what’s important to them and let them know that when you achieve that, it’s worth it.” She added, “It’s not for the little dinky button or the sticker on the outside of your folder, because it’s going to make you feel amazing that you accomplished something.” This educator identified that teachers need to propel self-determination for students by determining what is important and motivating to students, speaking to the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participant 1 concluded by stating,

Even younger kids should have an internal drive, you know, whether it’s running to tie your shoe or, you know, remembering to brush your teeth, or following a chore chart, or
whatever it is. There are levels of self-determination. You know, everybody should have goals. Everybody should have goals. Even as old as we get.

Participant 1 projected subconscious ageist biases, nothing about the importance of self-determining skills for “even younger kids.” However, she brings forth an integral component of self-determination: goal setting (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Past literature recommended goal setting as a way to help foster self-determining skills for all students and help to cultivate autonomy, one of the three basic human needs according to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2011).

Participant 2 determined that age correlates to self-determination, because “I feel the older, more confident you get, the more self-determined you get.” She then elaborated to include that self-determination can be developed at a younger age, based on parenting style. It is a “nature versus nurture type of thing that will foster it.” In reflecting on her experience in the fifth-grade classroom, specifically on self-determination, she added, “I have some kids in fifth grade who have it, who’ve had it for a while, who come in with it. And then there are others who are just like, I’m just stupid, I’m never going to get this. And they give up too soon.” Here, Participant 2 identified the genuine need for an internal drive, a key component of self-determination, which is attained when the student’s three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2011).

Participant 3 noted differences in self-determination in her Kindergarten classroom, that there are often differences in “younger” kindergartners developmentally, which transcends to influence self-determining skills. She added that these “younger” learners do not want to learn but rather play. She explicitly expressed her ideas, stating she “feels that, you know, the older they get, and the better it is for them. But when they’re so little, when they come in at four years old, they’re not determined to learn. They want to play.”
Participant 4 articulated the integral role, that in her opinion, teachers play in developing self-determination. This is based on her experience in the Kindergarten co-taught setting. She expressed, “Young kids need to be taught self-determination. They need to understand what it is like to work through a task, and this can be done through teacher modeling and self-talk.” Here, she emphasized the integral role teachers play in fostering self-determination for elementary students. In accordance with student age and self-determination, she stated, “I think as students get older, we may see more self-determining skills, but what is interesting is that sometimes I feel as though we lose sight of the fact that they are still young at the upper elementary levels and still learning.”

Participant 5 reflected on her opinion of self-determination and how it is impacted by student age. She articulated that students “have better skills as they get older because they’ve been in school longer. They have a whole repertoire of things that they’ve learned that they can carry on with them. I mean the younger kids, I think it would be difficult for them.” Participant 5 expressed how student age influences self-determination, mainly because the longer one is in school, the more one knows.

Participant 6 identified the role of the teacher in fostering self-determination skills but from a different angle. He emphasized his thinking grounded in the correlation between praise and self-determination. In thinking of elementary-aged students and self-determination, he said, …meaningful praise and giving them information about why they did a good job or why they succeeded will help them sort of understand, you know, their strengths and weaknesses and then help them to understand, you know, this is what I need to work a little bit harder at. You know, I need to be...I need to be determined. I need to work harder because this is what’s challenging for me.
He identified that praise, when utilized effectively, can assist students in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, cultivating self-determining skills.

Participant 7 reflected on how self-determination and the impact age has on these skills for elementary learners, which directly aligned with the thinking of previous participants. She believed that self-determination is strengthened with age and the development of these skills needs the support of an adult figure. She said, “We might, for a younger student, need to provide them with or give them an understanding of what self-determination is and give them an understanding of how they can be involved in their own learning. Whereas for an older student it might come a little bit more naturally.” However, when considering drive and motivation, she disputed her idea by adding,

But then I also feel like, on the other hand, younger students tend to be more intrinsically motivated than older students. As students get older, I feel like there are other things that are making them want to achieve these things. Like, for example, they don’t want to get a good grade. They only want to get to a grade because their parents are going to get mad or because they want to get into the school. I feel like that intrinsic motivation does comes more naturally as a young student.

She brought up the idea that intrinsic motivation decreased with age, something other participants have not alluded to until this point. In grounding this thinking in research for students with dis/abilities, the slow fade of motivation may occur due to improper placement, scaffolds, and instruction that is not differentiated appropriately for the needs of the individual learner.

Participant 8 was the only one whose thinking differed when looking at the interconnection between student age and self-determination. She said,
I don’t know if, like, age matters because I feel like some kids feel so confident in themselves and like it. I feel like it could be like that. They’re super young and feel like motivated and wanting to do well. But I also think if an older child could feel the same way, but I feel like it has a lot to do with like your confidence. If you don’t have that confidence in yourself, you just…it takes a little bit longer to build. I feel like the growth because you’re like, counter-like, working against yourself, like, in inside, so absolutely. She did not correlate self-determination to age but rather confidence. Seven out of eight participants agreed that self-determination is impacted by age, and skills affiliated with self-determination are strengthened as students mature.

**Team level.** All participants identified that they have goals for the students with dis/abilities in their classroom. These goals, similar to expectations, paralleled their general education peers but may differ due to specificity according to a student’s IEP. Within an IEP, a student has individualized goals. The SDT is built on the premise that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are three basic human needs that lead to engagement, motivation, and perhaps even enhanced performance when cultivated and fostered. If SDT is transcended to the elementary co-taught classroom, particularly for students with dis/abilities, involvement in their IEP should be an occurrence. Since students with dis/abilities in the co-taught setting have IEPs, which identify individual goals targeting academic concerns, it can be argued that elementary students should be involved in this process when appropriate.

According to the responses from Team A, students with dis/abilities (5th-grade students) did not have any involvement in their IEPs. Students did not attend meetings and were not aware of their goals. Team B also reported that their classified Kindergarten students did not have any hands-on involvement in their IEPs and were not aware of their goals. Team C reported that it is
difficult for third-grade students to be involved in their IEP process, but they do take into consideration what is challenging for a particular student and put it into their formalized document. Team D discussed the importance of student involvement in the IEP process, especially at a young age. They noted that it is important for students to know their needs and to start recognizing their strengths and weaknesses at a young age. This would make them better advocates for themselves as they get older. They also mentioned that they use surveys to gather student input on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their preferred learning style, to align the IEP goals with their aspirations.

The interviews with Teams A, B, C, and D all suggested that classified students, particularly those in lower grade levels, have little to no involvement in their IEP process. Teams A and B both mentioned that students at their level do not attend meetings or have knowledge of their goals. Team C stated that it is difficult for third-grade students to be involved in the process but that their struggles are considered when creating their IEP. Team D emphasized the importance of involving students in the IEP process at a young age, as it can help them become better advocates for themselves as they get older. Overall, the interviews indicated that increasing student involvement in the IEP process, particularly for younger students, could be beneficial for their self-determination.

**UDL is an Underutilized Framework for Instruction**

The fourth finding of this study addressed how co-taught classroom practices influence understanding and development of self-determination, addressing Research Question 2, which asked the following: How do practices in the co-taught classroom reflect understandings of self-determination? UDL needs to be more widely acknowledged and consciously utilized. It is a
framework that can be utilized to differentiate, provide opportunities to tap into the multiple modalities of all learners, and enhance self-determining skills for all learners.

The UDL framework provides students more access to their learning. This has been identified as a framework to ensure that instruction targets the needs of all learners, including but not limited to students with dis/abilities (Center for Applied and Special Technology, 2018). This enhances self-determination development by providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement for students, allowing them to access and demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways that align with their individual learning preferences and needs. Co-teachers in this study explained how they were using instructional practices that encompassed UDL components, yet did not hear of or were unaware that UDL existed. The UDL guidelines seek to optimize learning for all people based on scientific insights that all individuals learn. One could infer that this instructional tool could be used to strengthen the pedagogy and opportunities for students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom.

**Individual level.** Seven out of the eight participants in the study had never heard of the UDL. Participant 8 identified she had seen UDL in her college courses, but it was not something that was formally discussed at the present school where she works. She stated that she only knew of its existence but had not had any formal training or discussion surrounding this instructional framework. Since all co-teachers in this study were unfamiliar with UDL, this could create barriers for students with dis/abilities that can negatively impact their self-determination development. It is important for co-teachers to be knowledgeable of UDL so they can provide inclusive and accessible learning opportunities for all students.

**Team level.** An analysis of the team interview and co-taught lesson plan aided in the analysis of understanding of the UDL strategies (samples of co-taught lesson plans can be found
The analysis below recognized the use of UDL delineated in the three domains and how participants, although they had no understanding of UDL, were utilizing components of the framework in their instruction.

**Engagement.** UDL principles suggest providing multiple ways for students to be engaged in the learning process, such as through choice, collaboration, and real-world problem solving (Center for Applied and Special Technology, 2018). This allows students with dis/abilities to take an active role in their learning and to make decisions about their education, which supports self-determination. The UDL guidelines suggest various ways learners can engage and be motivated to learn. All co-teaching teams had traces of UDL guidelines aligned with engagement, but to varying degrees and arguably superficially. Traces in the co-taught lesson plan highlighted how kinesthetic learning opportunities were emphasized in all four classrooms. Team A engaged students in writing about reading through the analysis and student grading of responses. Team B used a tactile “shake and spill” activity to motivate their learners and assess their previous understanding of the mathematical concept of addition. Teams C and D used the gradual release of responsibility to engage students in a topic that can be honed in on through small-group instruction within the learner’s zone of proximal development. Although traces of instructional choices to enhance student engagement can be noted where all participants tapped into the different modalities of learners, there is growth in regards to providing multiple options for engagement.

**Representation.** UDL principles suggest providing multiple ways of presenting information, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. This allows students with different learning styles or disabilities to access the same information in a way that works best
for them. There are traces of differentiation associated with representation in all four lesson plans but only for some students or at one particular point in the lesson.

**Expression.** UDL principles suggest providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate their learning and understanding, such as through written or oral responses, projects, or performance tasks. This allows students with disabilities to showcase their knowledge and skills in the most comfortable way. Teams A and B held all students to the same task in their lesson plan, whereas Teams C and D differentiated their instructional outcomes based on student ability level. Teams A and B utilized the “one teach, one assist” method in which all students are required to complete the same task. Teams C and D differentiated both teaching and learning through station teaching.

Overall, UDL guidelines help to facilitate self-determination for students with disabilities by providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to support student learning and success. This framework can and should be utilized in co-taught classrooms to help to foster self-determining skills.

**Summary**

The findings of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study were discussed in detail throughout Chapter 4. Four major themes emerged: (1) educators’ mindset toward co-teaching impacts students with dis/abilities, (2) perceptions of inclusion for students with dis/abilities are (subconsciously) ableist, (3) self-determination is contingent on age, and (4) UDL is an underutilized framework for instruction.

The findings of this research suggest that educators’ mindset toward co-teaching can significantly impact the opportunities for self-determination for students with dis/abilities in the classroom. The preparation and practices of co-teaching teams play a crucial role in fostering self-determination skills for these students. It is essential to analyze these factors to better
understand opportunities for self-determination. In addition, the research found that perceptions of inclusion for students with dis/abilities are often unconsciously ableist and ageist. These biases can lead to contradictory perceptions of students with dis/abilities, which can negatively impact opportunities for self-determination. The study also suggests that self-determination is often seen as being contingent on age and that UDL is an underutilized framework for instruction that can enhance self-determining skills for all learners. UDL is a minimally used framework in co-taught classrooms in this study. Teachers are using strategies that have the potential to increase student development of self-determination, yet they do not understand the knowledge behind the strategies.

The findings of the results and interpretations from this hermeneutic phenomenology of practice study support the need for professional development opportunities for co-teachers and members of the school community in UDL, student involvement in the IEP process, and ways to dismantle negative stigmas and deficit-based thinking about elementary-aged students with dis/abilities.
Chapter 5

Discussion

As elementary schools continue to utilize co-teaching to support students with diverse learning needs and provide differentiation, it is critical to decode co-teachers’ meaning making of students with dis/abilities in their classroom. This understanding could allow for more effective co-teaching practices that promote, cultivate, and foster self-determining skills for students with dis/abilities, thus fighting systemic oppressive and ableist structures to provide an opportunity for an equitable education for dis/abled students.

This qualitative study used the hermeneutic phenomenology of practice to investigate the perceptions and experiences of elementary co-teachers regarding students with dis/abilities in their classrooms. The research aimed to examine the conscious and subconscious biases of co-teachers on Long Island who may impact the opportunities for self-determination for students with dis/abilities. Through the perspectives of eight participants, the study analyzed how co-teachers understand and make meaning of self-determination for students with dis/abilities and if they believe that disability classification or age affects opportunities for self-determining skills in the classroom. The study aimed to identify areas where co-teachers require more support and education to better understand and serve students with dis/abilities in the classroom. By capturing an understanding of this phenomenon through the lens of the eight participants, the researcher attempted to identify areas where more support in understanding and education for co-teachers is needed.

The method of data collection in three rounds allowed for triangulation. During the first data-collection phase, participants engaged in an individual semi-structured interview. The second phase required all co-teaching teams to submit an artifact, a co-taught lesson plan. The
third and final data-collection phase was through semi-structured co-teaching team interviews. Reliability was also ensured through the validation of the researcher’s preconceived judgments through field memos. Once the data were collected, the individual and partner interviews were transcribed. The co-taught lesson plan was analyzed through the lens of UDL guidelines (Appendix B). All interview data and co-taught lesson plans were uploaded to Dedoose. In vivo and value coding were used to identify the emergence of four major themes. The conclusions of this study have been developed from participants’ individual interviews; the co-taught lesson plans; team interviews; researcher field memos; and the study’s findings, results, and interpretations. In addition, the conclusion includes the answers to each research question used to drive this study. Following the conclusion, recommendations for future studies are reviewed.

The study produced four major findings. First, educators’ mindsets toward co-teaching greatly impacts students with dis/abilities. Second, perceptions of inclusion for students with dis/abilities are often subconsciously ableist. Third, self-determination is contingent on age. Fourth, UDL needs to be utilized more for instruction. The participants revealed a need to continue developing opportunities for self-determination for elementary-aged students with dis/abilities in the co-taught classroom.

Self-determination refers to a combination of skills, knowledge, and opportunities that allow individuals to direct and regulate their own life, leading to a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment (Al Hazmi & Ahmad, 2018; Shogren et al., 2017). A synthesized definition of self-determination utilizing the perspectives of each participant generated the following: self-determination is the drive, determination, and motivation to persevere and accomplish a goal. This definition aligns with SDT, which Ryan and Deci (1991) identified as humans having three basic needs:
1. Competence, the need to feel effective and capable in personal endeavors

2. Autonomy, the need to experience control over one’s personal life and decisions

3. Relatedness, the need to feel connected

In the context of SDT, the participants’ collective definition, “the drive, determination, and motivation to persevere and accomplish a goal,” aligns with the need for competence and autonomy. The drive and motivation to accomplish a goal can reflect a sense of competence and control over one’s own life, while the determination to persevere can reflect the importance of autonomy in decision making and goal pursuit. However, the relatedness aspect of SDT is not explicitly captured in this definition. Although specific components of the participants’ shared definition tapped into essential aspects of SDT, the findings did not necessarily duplicate their mindsets and practices in the co-taught classroom grounded in SDT-aligned thinking. The varying definitions provided by participants aligned with Cho et al.’s (2013) research findings in that there is a discrepancy in teachers’ perceptions about the importance of self-determination and what is instilled and reflected in the classroom. Therefore, sometimes, elementary teachers do not recognize the importance of providing opportunities for self-determination within their classrooms.

One way to provide opportunities for self-determination is through UDL. The Center for Applied Special Technology (2018) constructed UDL as an overarching inclusive structure driven by the science of learning. UDL is a framework for designing educational experiences that are flexible and inclusive, providing multiple ways to access and engage with content, represent information, and express understanding. This approach helps to ensure that all students, including those with dis/abilities, can participate and succeed in the learning process. The National Center on Universal Design for Learning, a research and development center funded by
the U.S. Department of Education, is a leading advocate for UDL and provides resources and training to support its implementation in schools. Many professional organizations, including the International Society for Technology in Education and the Council for Exceptional Children, also recognize UDL as a best practice for supporting the learning and development of all students, including those with dis/abilities. Furthermore, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 formalized the encouragement of UDL through federal legislation.

The positive impact of UDL as a framework to improve learning was contradictory to the findings of this research study. Seven of the eight participants had no knowledge of UDL framework and one participant had a surface-level understanding. This comes as a surprise and a call to action for teacher development, as UDL is seen as a way to “level the playing field,” and consider multiple modalities and entry points, to ultimately meet the needs of all learners. Research suggested that administrators play an integral role in the launch and implementation of UDL, as an administrator’s strong personal conviction in the significance, advantages, and effectiveness of UDL can impact the beliefs of the faculty and staff (Grillo, 2022).

This research study showed that, overwhelmingly, co-teachers may be utilizing components of the UDL in their pedagogical practices but have not received training or exposure to the benefits of the UDL guidelines. This corresponded to previous research findings that have found both administrators and teachers are unfamiliar with UDL and how to implement the framework with fidelity. Jordan (2018) argued that teachers are unlikely to adopt new instructional methods, particularly inclusive ones, unless they first change their attitudes toward inclusive teaching and students with disabilities. Lee and Picanco (2013) discovered a strong connection between teachers’ views, either favorable or unfavorable, toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and their application of inclusive teaching strategies, therefore
impeding the implementation of the UDL framework in their classroom. The instructional method, UDL, emphasizes versatility, adjustability, student decision making, and increased diversity through inclusion (Center for Applied and Special Technology, 2018). The UDL framework helps to provide opportunities for self-determining skills.

The contingency of age on the ability to develop self-determination is contradictory to the self-determination research of this study. Field et al. (1998) and Wehmeyer (2002) highlighted that self-determination skills encompass a range of factors and knowledge that were not dependent on chronological age. Teachers need to create opportunities for students with dis/abilities to cultivate and develop self-determination skills regardless of their age. Hart and Brehm (2013) stated there are “great reasons to teach self-advocacy skills as early as possible to empower students to have the strongest future outcomes” (p. 40). The findings of this study suggest that participants’ confidence in students acquiring self-determination skills relies on quantitative measures. It also highlights a static view of self-determination with structured processes and procedures instead of seeing self-determination as a continuum in which students can always acquire skills regardless of grade or age level (Hart & Brehm, 2013).

Elementary teachers identify the importance of self-determination, a finding that is analogous to this research study. However, self-determining opportunities for students at the elementary level are arguably superficial. Studies by Stang et al. (2009) and Cho et al. (2013) explored teachers’ views and practices regarding self-determination skills for students with disabilities. Stang et al. (2009) found that elementary school teachers generally recognize the importance of teaching self-determination skills but only focus on problem solving, self-management, and self-regulation in their classrooms. This corresponded with the peripheral opportunities provided by educators in this study to foster self-determining skills for students in
their elementary co-taught classrooms. Middle school educators, on the other hand, teach the concept of *self-determination* more frequently (Strang et al., 2009), an understanding that strengthened the study’s findings that age impacts self-determination. Cho et al. (2013) determined the predictors of teachers’ perceptions and practices toward self-determination and found no differences among teachers in various groups, including students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities. This aligns with the research in this study, as dis/ability classification does not impact self-determination.

Undoubtedly, there is an intersectionality between ageism and ableism that hinders opportunities for elementary-aged students with dis/abilities. This became evident when three fourths of participants believed that students with dis/abilities should not be involved in their IEP process, a deficit mindset rooted in ageism and ableism. The IDEA (2004) recognizes the importance of student participation in the IEP process. This legislature states that, when appropriate, students should attend their IEP meeting. By law, the student must be invited if the meeting focuses on postsecondary goals and transition services. IDEA requires consideration of student participation in IEP meetings for all students over 14. However, educators at all levels of education, including elementary, should provide opportunities for students to have their voices heard. In contrast to the findings of this study, research supported the importance of student involvement in the IEP process for all students, including those in elementary school (Konrad, 2008; Skrtic, 1991; Winsor et al., 2009), a practice that is not occurring for a majority of elementary students with dis/abilities.

In education, students who are actively involved in their IEP process have been shown to have higher levels of self-determination (Seong et al., 2015). This can be attributed to the fact that the IEP process provides opportunities for students to make decisions about their own
learning, set goals, and participate in their education planning. According to Konrad (2008), student involvement in the IEP process can increase their self-advocacy skills and accountability for learning. Winsor et al. (2009) identified that student involvement in the IEP process can lead to greater student ownership and understanding of their learning goals and needs. Skrtic (1991) also found that involving students in their IEP process can lead to more positive outcomes, including better educational and behavioral progress. Including elementary students in their IEP process can be beneficial for their academic and personal growth, as this involvement can lead to greater self-advocacy skills, understanding of their learning goals and needs, and positive outcomes. Although research suggests the benefit of involvement in the IEP process, this opportunity, which strengthens self-determining skills, was not deemed “appropriate” by the majority of participants interviewed for this research study.

The notion of “when appropriate” in special education refers to limiting access to education or services for students with dis/abilities based on the assumption that they are not capable of achieving at the same level as their general education peers. This approach has been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and low expectations for students with dis/abilities and for violating their right to free and appropriate education as guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). This age-based thinking may overlook the fact that some elementary-aged students may have the maturity and understanding to participate in their IEP process, while some students over the age of 14 may not be ready (Skrtic, 1991), contradicting the findings of participants. This perpetuates the idea that students are not capable or competent to make decisions about their own education until they reach a certain age, which is a form of ageism (Winsor et al., 2009). Elementary students with
dis/abilities should be provided opportunities to foster self-determining skills, as this is appropriate.

This conception of appropriateness appeared repeatedly in special education legislature, and underlying sentiments of the meaning were analogous in the interviews of participants. Findings from this study suggested that elementary students with dis/abilities should be included when appropriate, and participants shared ableist views of students with dis/abilities, often subconsciously. IDEA (2004) proposed the LRE principle, which states that, to the greatest extent appropriate, students with disabilities should be educated with their general education peers and be provided with the support and accommodations they need to be successful (IDEA, 2004). This sparked an inclusive movement to mainstream students with dis/abilities, when appropriate.

Just as the law does not define special education as a place, but rather the configuration of services and supports as defined in a student’s IEP, inclusion is not a place, but rather a systemic approach to uniquely addressing student learning and social engagement within the same instructional frameworks and settings designed for the whole school community. (National Council on Disability, 2021, p. 12)

Special education and inclusion should not be viewed as physical locations but rather as approaches to education and support for students with dis/abilities. This perspective aligns with the principles of UDL, which calls for instructional materials and environments to be designed in a flexible manner to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Moreover, research has consistently demonstrated the benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities, including improved academic achievement, social relationships, and self-esteem (Inclusion, 2016). In addition, inclusive education can also lead to improved attitudes and greater
understanding among non-disabled peers (Hughes & Russel, 2006). Therefore, as practitioners and educators in the field of special education, it is our responsibility to strive for a systemic approach to inclusion and to advocate for the implementation of UDL principles in our schools and classrooms. By doing so, we can ensure that all students have access to the same instructional frameworks and settings, their unique learning and social engagement needs are addressed, and that students with dis/abilities are included.

Instead of using “when appropriate,” it is recommended to adopt a UDL approach that recognizes the diverse needs and strengths of all learners (Center for Applied and Special Technology, 2018). Although this research study exposed a lack of utilization and understanding of UDL, this flexible framework proactively designs educational environments to meet the needs of a diverse student population, including those with disabilities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). This approach shifts the focus from “What is wrong with the student?” to “What is the best way to support the student?” (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Instead of limiting access to education based on arbitrary and subjective standards of appropriateness, research suggests that students with dis/abilities should be given opportunities to participate fully and meaningfully in their education and to learn alongside their general education peers. The use of UDL could and would dismantle ableist thinking surrounding of inclusion found in this study. The ableist thinking infused in the mindsets of elementary co-teachers emphasized the importance of re-establishing instructional practices within the co-taught model in asset-based thinking rather than deficit-based thinking. UDL can be used as a tool to dismantle ableism in the co-taught classroom.

Co-teaching is an inclusive model deemed appropriate for some students with dis/abilities. This two-teach model is a way to service and support students with dis/abilities in
the general education classroom. Analogous to findings, some of the drawbacks to the inclusive setting of co-teaching are reported by educators:

- Lack of planning time for co-teachers: Educators reported that they often lacked the time and resources to effectively plan and collaborate with one another in co-teaching settings (Keefe & Moore, 2004).
- Role confusion: Educators reported role confusion as a drawback of co-teaching, with both teachers often unsure of their responsibilities and who is responsible for different aspects of the classroom (Beninghof, 2020; Conderman et al., 2008).
- Lack of support and training: Educators reported that they lacked support and training in co-teaching, including ongoing professional development opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge (Friend & Cook, 2011).

The demise of the co-taught setting impacting students with dis/abilities can be due to the negative experience or perspectives of the co-taught model. To accentuate the benefits of the co-taught model identified by researchers and findings, the gradual release of responsibility should be layered with UDL to abolish deficit thinking grounded in ageist and ableist mindsets for elementary students with dis/abilities in association with autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

As proposed in SDT, students have a need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, prior to elaborating further, it is critical to unpack the generation of self-determination. The concept of self-determination is often traced back to the Enlightenment period in Europe and the idea of individualism (Weitz, 2015). Self-determination emphasizes personal autonomy and the ability of individuals to make their own choices and decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, this concept is primarily based on Western European
cultural values and may not be applicable or relevant to other cultures emphasizing collectivism or community values. In many non-Western cultures, the emphasis is on collective decision making, where the opinions and interests of the group are prioritized over individual autonomy. Therefore, self-determination as a predominantly Eurocentric idea may not fully capture the experiences and needs of individuals from other cultures.

To create a more inclusive and collaborative approach to supporting students with dis/abilities, moving away from a strictly individualistic perspective of self-determination may be necessary. Instead, we can focus on a team or “we” approach that includes all stakeholders involved in supporting the students’ experiences, including families and caregivers. By removing the focus on the self, we can broaden the understanding of what it means to support and empower individuals with dis/abilities. This approach can lead to more collaboration and shared decision making among stakeholders, ultimately leading to more effective support for individuals with dis/abilities and requiring collective efforts to ensure that everyone is included and supported.

Rethinking self-determination through a team and collective approach could benefit elementary-age students with disabilities in several ways. First, it can promote a sense of community and shared responsibility among all stakeholders involved in the student’s education, including teachers, parents, and caregivers. This can help to create a supportive environment where the student’s individual strengths and needs are recognized and addressed, and where all parties, including the student, work collaboratively toward common goals. Second, a team approach to self-determination can help to empower students with dis/abilities by providing them with opportunities to make decisions and participate in the planning of their education, including but not limited to involvement in the IEP process. By involving students in decision-making
processes, they can develop a sense of autonomy and agency, which can ultimately lead to greater self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In co-taught elementary classrooms, a collective approach to self-determination can foster determination among all students, not just those with dis/abilities. By promoting a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, students can learn to work together to achieve common goals. This can help to build a sense of community and support, which can ultimately lead to greater academic and social success for all students. Furthermore, a collective approach to self-determination can benefit co-teachers by providing them with opportunities to work collaboratively and share expertise. This can help to create a more inclusive and responsive learning environment, where the needs of all students are met and the expertise of both educators are valued. By working together, co-teachers can develop more effective strategies for supporting students with dis/abilities and fostering determination among all students.

In realigning our thinking surrounding determination to engage in a more collective approach, education can be revolutionized for students with dis/abilities. Noted in this study is the impact of ageism and ableism on the ability of elementary students with dis/abilities to cultivate essential components of self-determination, in addition to the overemphasis on the “self.” The belief that individuals of a certain age are less capable, competent, or deserving of respect intersected with the idea that individuals with dis/abilities are less capable, competent, or deserving of respect, which can lead to low expectations and a lack of support for students with dis/abilities, hindering their ability to develop a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To combat the push and pull of these two oppressive factors for students with dis/abilities at the elementary age, the synthesis of gradual release of responsibility and UDL can be used as a structure for co-teachers in thinking about self-determining skills.
Gradual release of responsibility is a teaching model that provides a framework for scaffolding the learning process, allowing students to gradually take on more control and responsibility for their learning. This “I do, you do, we do” teaching framework promotes student learning by gradually shifting responsibility from the teacher to the student. The framework starts with the teacher modeling the task (“I do”), then having the students practice with the teacher’s support (“we do”), and finally allowing students to complete the task independently (“you do”; Fisher & Frey, 2011). In the context of students with dis/abilities, this model can be used to help foster self-determination by gradually increasing their involvement in decision-making and goal-setting processes. This approach can be used to dismantle ageist and ableist viewpoints in elementary co-taught classrooms for students with dis/abilities by providing opportunities for student self-determination and inclusive practices. This gradual shift in responsibility can help students with dis/abilities build their skills and confidence, while also challenging ableist beliefs that they are unable to learn or participate in the classroom.

If educators were to merge gradual release of responsibility with UDL, it would benefit the experiences of students with dis/abilities, as they would have more opportunities to cultivate self-determining skills, which to this point have been deterred due to ableist and ageist thinking in co-taught classrooms. Elementary teachers of students with dis/abilities can create learning experiences that empower their students to take control of their own learning and become more self-determined. This not only helps students develop important life skills but also creates a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for all students. As students become more competent and confident in their abilities, they are likely to experience increased autonomy and relatedness, which can lead to greater motivation and engagement in the classroom (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The “I do, you do, we do” framework overlapped with the UDL guidelines can help
dismantle ageist and ableist viewpoints in elementary co-taught classrooms for students with disabilities by promoting inclusive practices and student self-determination, through the implementation of UDL guidelines.

Limitations

The study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Social desirability can be seen as a limitation of this study. Social desirability refers to the tendency of individuals to present themselves in a positive light and conform to what they believe is expected of them in a given situation. This conformity can be a limitation in this
qualitative study because participants are more likely to express positive views about the co-teaching model and their experiences with it, even if their actual experiences are more complex or negative. This can make it difficult for the researcher to gain a true understanding of the participants’ perspectives and experiences and may lead to findings that are not representative of the population as a whole.

A sample size of four co-teaching teams, eight participants, limits the generalizability of the findings of this phenomenological qualitative research. The small sample size may not be representative of the larger population of co-teaching teams; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other co-teaching teams or even other schools. Furthermore, the small sample size may have yet to capture the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and practices of co-teaching teams, which may have led to a narrow understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the study results are more likely to be specific to the participants rather than generalizable to the broader population of co-teaching teams.

Another limitation is the specific grade-level band, Kindergarten through 5th grade, utilized in this study. The targeted range of classrooms may serve as a limitation for qualitative data because the experiences and perspectives of teachers working with students in different grade levels may differ. To elaborate, teachers who work with older students may have different approaches, perceptions, and beliefs about teaching students with dis/abilities than those who work with younger students. This could lead to limitations in the generalizability of the findings that may not be representative of the experiences of teachers working with different age groups or levels of students. Furthermore, a targeted grade level band may not include the perspectives of teachers who work with students in different settings such as secondary or post-secondary
education. This would also limit the generalizability of the findings and make it difficult to compare and contrast the perspectives of different teachers working with different students.

Last, the need for student perspective should be acknowledged. Students’ understanding of the co-taught classroom and self-determination would offer an additional lens to this study. This can lead to an incomplete understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the students, who are the primary focus of the study. In addition, by not observing the classroom, the researcher may miss important nuances and details of the classroom dynamics and interactions that can inform their understanding of the phenomenon. This can lead to a lack of depth in the data and findings, which may limit the ability to draw meaningful conclusions.

**Future Research**

From this study, there are various implications for future research. One potential focus is on the development and conceptualization of self-determination for teachers themselves and how this impacts students with dis/abilities. Research has shown that teacher self-determination, or the level of autonomy and control they have over their work, is positively related to student self-determination. When teachers feel empowered and supported in their work, they are more likely to create a positive and supportive learning environment that fosters students’ sense of control and autonomy (Wehmeyer et al., 2011). In this type of environment, students are more likely to feel confident in their ability to make decisions and take control over their own learning. On the other hand, when teachers feel disempowered or unsupported, they may create a negative learning environment that undermines students’ sense of control and autonomy (Wehmeyer et al., 2011). Therefore, a study that analyzes the impact of elementary co-teachers’ self-determination and its impact on students would offer more perspective.
Future research could also look closely at understanding of the two-taught model as an inclusive structure through the eyes of elementary co-teachers. The co-teaching model is a widely used instructional strategy aimed at supporting students with dis/abilities in inclusive settings. Despite its widespread use, there are still limitations to the co-teaching model that need to be addressed through future research. One of these limitations is the lack of understanding of the co-taught model by many members of the school community, including the two educators involved. This lack of understanding has implications for the implementation and effectiveness of the co-teaching model (Friend & Cook, 2011). Another implication for future research is to better understand what the co-teaching model means for both special education and general education teachers. Co-teaching can be a challenging and demanding experience for teachers, and it is important to explore the experiences of these educators to improve the co-teaching model (Beninghof, 2020; Conderman et al., 2008). Furthermore, there is a need for research to explore the impact of the co-teaching model on elementary student outcomes, including academic achievement and self-determination (Friend & Bursuck, 2011). This information could provide valuable contributions to the inclusive model and the experiences of students with dis/abilities.

A study with only White teachers as participants is limited in generalizability and applicability to diverse classrooms. The experiences and perspectives of teachers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds may vary and influence their approach to co-teaching, supporting students with dis/abilities, and constructing self-determination regarding the individual or collective mindset. A theoretical framework examining the intersection between ability and race, Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit), emerged through inquiry about marginalized groups of individuals through both the lens of Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (Connor et al.,
CO-TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS WITH DIS/ABILITIES

2016). DisCrit is a way to draw attention to and capture the complexities concerning the intersectionality between race and ability. This theory should be considered in future research on co-teaching and self-determination. Therefore, the sample of participants should be a racially diverse profile of teachers to ensure that the findings are relevant and applicable. By intentionally recruiting teachers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and considering how their experiences and perspectives may shape their practice, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of co-teaching, self-determination, and its impact on students with dis/abilities from diverse backgrounds.

Although UDL has been shown to have positive impacts on student achievement and engagement, there is a need for further research to understand its effects on co-teaching, as there is limited research examining this impact. Lee and Picanco (2013) found that UDL strategies improved the quality of co-teaching partnerships, leading to more meaningful collaboration between teachers and increased opportunities for student engagement. However, this study was limited in scope, and further research is needed to fully understand the effects of UDL on co-teaching. Specifically, research is needed to explore the specific UDL strategies that are most effective for co-teaching and the ways these strategies can be integrated into the co-teaching partnership to promote equity and inclusion.

A final recommendation for future research is examining the impact of teacher dual certification on the experience of students with dis/abilities in the co-taught model. The dual certification of general education and special education teachers has been shown to have a positive impact on the co-teaching model and students with dis/abilities in the elementary classroom. Research has demonstrated that dual certification can lead to more effective collaboration between general and special education teachers, increased understanding of the
needs of students with dis/abilities, and improved educational outcomes for these students (Jacob & Lloydhauser, 2022). However, there is still much to be learned about the impact of dual certification on the co-taught model and students with dis/abilities. Future research should focus on exploring the specific ways in which dual certification affects the co-taught model, including the type of professional development and support that general education and special education teachers receive and how this impact their collaboration and understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. In addition, researchers should examine the impact of dual certification on the academic and social outcomes of students with disabilities (Jacob & Lloydhauser, 2022), including their levels of self-determination, engagement, and achievement.

**Conclusions**

The findings from this study provide an important perspective on the meaning making of self-determination for elementary students with dis/abilities: the mindsets and practices of general and special education co-teachers. In considering legislation that requires students to be instructed within their LRE, co-teaching has emerged as an inclusive practice that is appropriate for some students with dis/abilities. It is crucial to examine how co-teachers’ perspectives hinder or foster opportunities for students with dis/abilities in their classrooms, particularly addressing self-determination skills. Arguably, both conscious and subconscious biases dominated by deficit thinking impact the experiences of students in the co-taught classroom. This deficit thinking is arguably rooted in the intersection of two oppressive societal marginalizations: ageism and ableism.

It is time to acknowledge the historic exclusion of individuals with dis/abilities from the education system, as the institutional origins were a privilege for able-bodied White males. This perspective has contributed to the oppressive structure for present elementary students with
dis/abilities. This exclusion has also led to a lack of true inclusive practices and opportunities for students with dis/abilities to fully participate in their education, hindering the development of self-determining skills. For one inclusive model, co-teaching, to be successful, both knowledge and implementation of the UDL framework must be executed. Through the gradual release of responsibility, co-teachers can explicitly provide opportunities for self-determination, dismantling ableist and ageist beliefs, and allowing students to reach and exceed their potential.
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Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocol

Establishing Context and Exploring the Participant’s Experience

For all respondents: The study will be explained to the participant, a general education or special education teacher in an elementary (grades K-6) co-taught classroom, by the Principal Investigator. Consent will be articulated and questions of the participants will be answered. The participant will sign the consent form, a dated and signed copy of the form will be given to the subject.

Brief Project Description: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to make meaning of co-teachers within elementary classrooms perceive self-determination for students with dis/abilities.

I. Introduction
   1. Can you start by stating your name, current job position, and experience in education?
      ○ Probe: What experience do you have in teaching students with dis/abilities?
      ○ Probe: Describe your experience with co-teaching.
      ○ Probe: Imagine you were explaining the co-taught model in your district to a parent who has no prior experience. What would you say?
      ○ Probe: How do you feel about your role as a co-teacher?
      ○ Probe: What do you like most and least about the co-teaching model?

II. Unpacking Ableist Beliefs
   2. Describe your expectations for students with dis/abilities in your class.
      ○ Probe: Are there differences depending on dis/ability category?
   3. Define inclusion in your own words.
      ○ Probe: How do you believe inclusion benefits students in your classroom?
   4. What is your experience with UDL?
   5. Could you describe how a student’s dis/ability classification impacts their success in the classroom?
      ○ Probe: Can you explain how a student’s day is impacted by their disability?

III. Unpacking Ageist Beliefs
   6. Describe your expectations for (insert approximate age of students in class) year old.
   7. Do you think students in elementary school should have more of a say in their learning?

IV. Importance of Self-Determination for Students with Dis/Abilities
   8. What are the most important goals that you have set for your students in this class? Explain.
      ○ Probe: How do goals set for students with dis/abilities differ from their general education peers?
   9. In your own words, what is self-determination?
      ○ Probe: How, if at all, do you think self-determination has positively impacted students with dis/abilities in your classroom?
      ○ Probe: Can you provide an example of a time you cultivated or fostered self-determination for a student with dis/abilities in your classroom?
○ Probe: Explain how a student’s age impacts self-determining skills.
○ Probe: What changes in the district, if any, have you seen in accordance to self-determination for students with dis/abilities?

10. How well are students with dis/abilities able to perform within your content area?
○ Probe: What kinds of difficulties do they have?

11. Suppose I wanted to prepare a lesson which provided opportunities for self-determination, what would you suggest?
○ Probe: How do you go about implementing self-determination skills within a lesson?
Appendix B

Co-Taught Lesson Plan Analysis

The purpose of this lesson plan analysis is to see how the proposed phenomena might “reside” in the classroom through teacher practice. The following field note template, adapted from UDL guidelines will be completed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UDL Guideline</th>
<th>Notes &amp; Noticings from Lesson Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Provide Multiple Means of Representation:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide options for perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 1.1 Offer ways of customizing the display of information</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● 1.2 Offer alternatives for auditory information</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● 1.3 Offer alternatives for visual information</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Provide options for language, mathematical expressions, and symbols</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 2.1 Clarify vocabulary and symbols</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 2.2 Clarify syntax and structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 2.3 Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 2.4 Promote understanding across language</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 2.5 Illustrate through multiple media</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Provide options for comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 3.1 Activate or supply background knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 3.2 Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 3.3 Guide information processing, visualization, and manipulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 3.4 Maximize transfer and generalization</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Provide Multiple Means for Action and Expression:</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Provide options for physical action</td>
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<tr>
<td>● 4.1 Vary the methods for response and navigation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 4.2 Optimize access to tools and assistive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Provide options for expression and communication
   - 5.1 Use multiple media for communication
   - 5.2 Use multiple tools for construction and composition
   - 5.3 Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance

6. Provide options for executive functions
   - 6.1 Guide appropriate goal setting
   - 6.2 Support planning and strategy development
   - 6.3 Facilitate managing information and resources
   - 6.4 Enhance capacity for monitoring progress

III. Provide Multiple Means for Engagement:

7. Provide options for recruiting interest
   - 7.1 Optimize individual choice and autonomy
   - 7.2 Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity
   - 7.3 Minimize threats and distractions

8. Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence
   - 8.1 Heighten salience of goals and objectives
   - 8.2 Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge
   - 8.3 Foster collaboration and community
   - 8.4 Increase mastery-oriented feedback

9. Provide options for self-regulation
   - 9.1 Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation
   - 9.2 Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies
   - 9.3 Develop self-assessment and reflection
Appendix C

Co-Teaching Team Interview Protocol

Placing the Teams’ Experience in Context

For all respondents: The study will be explained to the participant, a general education or special education teacher in an elementary (grades K-6) co-taught classroom, by the Principal Investigator. Consent will be articulated and questions of the participants will be answered. The participant will sign the consent form, a dated and signed copy of the form will be given to the subject.

Brief Project Description: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this second round of interview for my dissertation study. Just as a reminder, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to make meaning of co-teachers within elementary classrooms perceive self-determination for students with dis/abilities. I would like for you to think about this interview as an opportunity to think about what happens in your co-taught classroom. Please feel free to ask for clarification at any point. To start the discussion, I will pose a question to you both and either of you can jump in to answer. Please state your first name and the grade you teach when you speak for the first time.

I. Co-Teaching Dynamics

1. In your district’s co-taught model, there is a special education and general education teacher. What do you see as your role as the general education teacher? What do you see as your role as the special education teacher?

2. What are your co-teaching partner’s strengths? How are these strengths utilized in the co-teaching classroom?

3. Explain how you collaborate to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom.
   ○ Probe: Talk about a time when you collaborated to foster self-determining skills of a student with dis/abilities.

4. Describe the process you use to design a lesson.
   ○ Probe: How do you delegate responsibilities?

5. What co-teaching model do you utilize most frequently?
   ○ Probe: In your experience as a co-teaching team, what was your most impactful lesson? Describe.

II. Recalling Self-Determination From the Co-Taught Lesson Plan
6. What was the purpose of this lesson?
   ○ Probe: How did you determine the topic of this lesson?
   ○ Probe: By the end of the lesson, what do you want the children to know and do?
   ○ Probe: Were there any students that struggled more (or were more successful) than other students? How did you respond to that in the lesson?
   ○ Probe: Explain how students demonstrated self-determination in this lesson.

III. Reflecting on Meaning Making of Phenomenon

1. Link back to previous experiences associated with students with/disabilities.

2. Link back to previous experiences associated with co-teaching.

3. Link back to previous experiences associated with self-determination.

Grand tour question: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about your relationships or how you teach students with dis/abilities in your classroom?
Appendix D

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Experience in Education</th>
<th>Experience in Co-Teaching</th>
<th>Role in the Co-Taught Classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>General Education</td>
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## Appendix E

### Co-Teaching Team Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Number of Years Co-Teaching Together</th>
<th>Grade Level at Time of Study</th>
<th>Students with IEPs in Class at Time of Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>5th Grade</td>
<td>5 out of 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3 &amp; 4</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>6 out of 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3rd Grade</td>
<td>7 out of 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>7 &amp; 8</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>5th Grade</td>
<td>12 out of 26</td>
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## Appendix F

### Table of Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Categories</th>
<th>Participant &amp; Team Values</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Co-Teaching Model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beliefs, Attitudes &amp; Values towards Students with Dis/Abilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Determination</td>
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<td>Student Involvement</td>
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<td>Individual v. Team</td>
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<td>Deficit Based Thinking</td>
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<td>Asset Based Thinking</td>
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<td>Ableism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ageism</td>
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## Appendix G

### Direct Quotes About Perceived Roles

**Co-Teacher Direct Quotes: Perceived Role in the Co-Taught Classroom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Education Teacher</th>
<th>Special Education Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team A</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My job is to really plan and lead the lessons. I really take a lead on the curriculum and do what the district needs us to do (Participant 2).</td>
<td>And I feel as though my job is to add onto what she has to say (Participant 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team B</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know, the way I feel like we kind of work is, you know, sometimes like I'll plan the curriculum stuff, but then she'll be able to take it and say, okay, all student aid can't do this, so let me modify it for this one. So we kind of, you know, we both kind of come up with the curriculum together. But she's really awesome with kind of tweaking it to make it fit for them (Participant 3).</td>
<td>Sometimes I would have to be like give me a job, please. When I did my personal interview, I was saying, it was like sometimes I would take the more of secretarial work. Sometimes you would do the more planning. But P3 was so good with, like, knowing, like what needs what needs to get done (Participant 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team C</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know, both responsible for curriculum and also both responsible for, you know, the IEP work where she her name is on it. And ultimately she's responsible for inputting all the data I have. And, you know, I have input into what goes on their ideas and their goals and the wording of their stands. And she has input in the curriculum and how we move through different projects and assignments. So, in our district. My title I guess would be curriculum specialist, but it's much more fluid in our particular model (Participant 6).</td>
<td>I was going to say what he said, but again, the model in our room is very seamless. You could walk in and not be able to decipher who is the current teacher and who is the special ed teacher. But my role would be more to differentiate, to modify, to put in any graphic organizers during writing or any additional hands on, you know, hands on manipulatives for math, like things of that nature. But again, we kind of both do both of those (Participant 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team D</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't see it as like I'm a separate entity. I just feel like we're just two equal bodies that do literally every</td>
<td>Like even for IEP progress reports, when I do the goals, like I bounce them off for, it's not just me doing that, even though technically that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single thing that either of us, like, requires (Participant 8).</td>
<td>falls under my umbrella of responsibility. But now we're not the norm in our school. Like our sixth grade classrooms, their inclusion setting they basically departmentalize among themselves. One teacher teaches math and science. One teacher teaches social studies, and that's it. Like, there's no co-teaching going on there (Participant 7).</td>
</tr>
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Appendix H

Lesson Plan Sample: Co-Teaching Team A

Rationale: As the New York State ELA Assessment approaches, Teachers College suggests taking several steps to ensure that students are prepared to answer short response questions effectively. Particularly, students in this classroom struggle with crafting short responses that include both their own thinking and “bullseye” evidence from the text to support their claims. We have been working on expanding our thought-work with both fiction and nonfiction texts throughout the year. Looking at their work and thinking about how to improve it will help the students not only learn the criteria for a successful short response but understand what the criteria mean. Additionally, my students seem to learn best from looking at mentor-texts and evaluating them. This lesson will also provide students with an opportunity to give each other structured feedback that will guide them as they revise and craft additional short responses.

Essential Questions:

a) How do we know our short responses are successful?  
b) How can we identify the criteria that a “level four short response” should include?  
c) What makes this writing strong? What could make this writing stronger?

Learning Intention: We are learning to evaluate and rank our short responses so that we can figure out what specific things (criteria) a successful short response should include.

Success Criteria:

1. Read the writing closely  
2. Ask: What makes this writing strong?  
3. Ask: What could make this writing stronger?  
4. Compare it to other pieces of writing to determine which is MOST successful (highest level)  
5. Record your feedback on the chart

Materials: Student short response samples (each member of the group gets one that is NOT their own), chart paper, learning intentions and success criteria slide,

Methods of Assessment: Throughout the lesson, the teacher will conduct checks for understanding to ensure that the students are understanding what is expected of them, class discussions will serve as another form of assessment as it will let the teacher know which students may need additional support during the engagement section, Student charts will serve as a final method of assessment for this lesson because it will let the teacher know if students are understanding all of the criteria for a successful short response and which criteria the teacher should focus in one in future lessons.
**Introduction (5-6 minutes):**

*Ignite Background Knowledge:* Teacher will begin by posing a question to the students: “Why do you think we were so successful as we started to write our boxes and bullets essays?” Possible student responses include: “we knew what to do”, “we understood the stories”, “we had a list of what we needed” Teacher will build upon this discussion by guiding students toward how they used the tools provided. “I was thinking we should work together today to look at our short responses and try to figure out the little parts that come together to create an amazing short response. I bet you can already think of some criteria or things to include to make your response successful.”

*Scaffold Key Vocabulary:* Today we are going to try to “rank” our writing. What do you think that might mean? (Deciding which writing it the best). “The best way to do that is to evaluate our writing. This means we will look at our writing and decide WHAT makes it so strong?”

“When we play video games, how do we get to the next level?” Student responses will vary.

“When we play video games, and we have to do specific things to help us move up a level. We are going to think about what specific things we can do to help move our short responses up to a higher level.”

*Introduce Learning Intention:* “Today we are learning to evaluate and rank our short responses so that we can figure out what specific things (criteria) a successful short response should include.”

Teacher will ask students how figuring out what is included might help them when they revise their short responses or go on to write future responses.

Check for understanding: Put your thumb up if you understand what your job will be today.

*Explain Success Criteria:* Teacher will display a short response on the Smart Board. She will also display the success criteria on that slide.

This short response will have evidence that does not make sense or match the answer.

Teacher will model reading the short response, she will ask: “What makes the writing strong?”

The teacher will comment on how it seems like the student included details from the text…which is a great thing.

Then, she will ask: “What could make this writing stronger?”

She will model looking at the evidence and saying: “This information does not seem to match what the author is trying to say. I think there is other evidence that might be stronger.”

She will pose this question to the students: Where does this piece of writing rank? Does it have all the criteria to be successful or only some?

Check for understanding: Wave your hands in the air if you know what to do with your group.
Differentiation: Teacher will repeat her questions several different ways to ensure that students understand what is being asked of them, teacher will give extended wait time and conduct several checks for understanding throughout the introduction. Additionally, the students will each be receiving a short response that they can read with ease. There are some students who have reading difficulties.

Exploration/Engagement (12-15 minutes):

Teacher will invite students to read each writing piece as a group and to follow the success criteria.

“Now, look carefully at each piece of writing. Think about what makes it so strong. What does it still need?”

“Make sure you are recording your feedback on your chart.”

As students explore each short response, the teacher will circulate the room and guide students toward thinking about different criteria that make for a successful short response. She will draw students’ attention to specific criteria. These criteria include answering the question that is being asked, including TWO details from one/both texts, making sure the evidence makes sense and matches the answer given, is in complete sentences.

Remind students of success criteria: Teacher will remind students to look at not only what makes the writing strong, but also what the writer could improve, think about where each piece of writing belongs on the chart, teacher will remind students to be recording their feedback on the chart.

Mid-Engagement: Teacher will call students attention to the work of several historians and ask them to think critically about the criteria they are describing. Example: “As I was listening in to this group, I heard J say that one example was better because it had a quote from the text and then M said that even though it’s a quote…it isn’t the BEST quote”

“What do we think? Should we just include any quote we can find? How can that writer improve?”

The teacher will call the students back together. There may be some students who do not get to fully go through every writing sample at their table. The teacher will remind the students that each writing sample brings us closer to figuring out what the MOST SUCCESSFUL responses include. “It’s okay if we did not rank all our writing.”

Differentiation: If the teacher notices that students need additional support when looking at the writing samples, she will invite them to come sit at the back table and she will take them through the evaluation step-by-step. The teacher will circulate and draw students’ attention to criteria as needed. Also, student groupings were created based on students’ reading levels and

Summary/Closure (5-6 minutes):

Teacher will use students’ explorations to identify the specific criteria that make for the MOST successful (level four) response.
Teacher will invite students to present their reasoning. She will guide students to take that reasoning and make a statement about what successful short responses need. She will frame this statement with the sentence frame. “A short response needs ________________ to make it successful.”

The goal is for students to recognize that short responses need: complete sentences, two details from one/both texts, evidence from the text that matches their answer, an answer to the question that is being posed.

To conclude the teacher will ask the students if they were successful today. “How do you know we were successful?” Possible student responses: “we figured out how to take our short responses to the next level” “We know how to make our short responses better, exactly what they need” “we followed the success criteria”

Teacher will ask students how they think this relates to what they are going to learn about in the future: “How might knowing these specific criteria change your short responses in the future? How will you use this information?”

**Differentiation:** The sentence frame allows for students to have additional support when structuring verbal answers and provides a jumping off point for discussion.

### STUDENT SHORT RESPONSE SAMPLES

**Question:**

In the title and many times in the story, “that” is used before the dog’s name of Spot. What does the word “that” show about the narrator’s relationship with the dog? Use **two** details from the story to support your response.

**Student Response Samples:**

The word that shows that the narrator gets annoyed of Spot. For example, “After we got clear of him, we started for the cabin, and when we arrived, there was that Spot sitting on the stoop waiting for us. Now how did he know we lived there?” This detail portrays that the narrator is not fawn of Spot. Another example is, “He always came back.” This proves that the narrator gets annoyed of Spot.

this shows that they do not recognize spot as a living thing but as a thing. some examples of this are them making money off him just trying to get him off their hands.
This shows that they call the dog that spot because it's not just any spot, it's their spot and that is what makes that spot so special.

they do not have room for a dog, but it came back to them every time. “I say we knew, for we were just getting acquainted with that Spot.” “We would have paid handsomely for anyone to take him off our hands for keeps. We had to get rid of him, and we could not give him away, for that would have been suspicious.”

they did not like the dog and needed to get rid of it.

He is saying how that spot is important and one of a kind by saying it as the title and saying before his name a lot in the story.

The word "that" is in the title because the narrator's relationship with the dog is good. This is because the title that dog makes me think that it’s the only dog that he would ever want like it’s the only dog in the world. Another detail is that he celebrated his arrival with a rough house. this shows he’s excited to see that spot.

it shows that when he says that spot that could mean that that spot is silly, annoying, carrying, caring. in the text it says I say we knew, for we were just getting acquainted with that Spot.

When the word “that” is used before the dog's name it shows me that the narrator doesn’t really care about Spot. One detail that shows this is that “They have now decided to sell Spot because, although he is a good-looking dog, he cannot be coaxed into working.” This shows that they only care about Spot doing work. Another detail is that “but cheered up two hours afterward when we sold him to an official courier.” This shows me that they keep on selling him because they
don’t want Spot. Using the word “that” shows me that the narrator doesn’t care cause calling someone “that” Spot doesn’t sound too nice.

Question:

What does the story "Wolf" reveal about the family members’ relationships with their dogs? Use two details from the story to support your response.

Student Response Examples:

The story Wolf reveals that Boy is proud of Wolf and the rest of the family didn’t care about Wolf. One detail of how the Boy is proud of Wolf that “The Boy was inordinately proud of his pet’s watchdog prowess.” A detail for how the family doesn’t care about Wolf is “Nobody except the Boy took any special interest in him.” These details show how the Boy is proud of Wolf and how the family didn’t care about Wolf.

It reveals that the boy took care of the wolf for his first 6 months when the wolf was at the place of sufferance. This shows that the boy really cared about him because he took care of him when nobody took a special interest in him. The 2 details are that the wolf looked like his original ancestors and the boy liked that.

The family has mixed feelings about each dog. For example, the boy is the only one in the family who cares for and loves for wolf while the family is giving the other dogs royal treatment just because they are more physically stunning. Another example is when the text states that wolf must sleep with one eye open while each dog had their own room to sleep in while wolf had to stand guard.

The story reveals that the family members (mistress and master) did not care for the dog. I can prove this statement by pulling a quote from text that says "Nobody except the Boy took any special interest in him. He was kept only because his better-formed brothers had died in
early puppyhood and because the Boy, from the outset, had loved him." Another example supporting my statement is this quote from the text: "From this shelter he was wont to set forth three or four times a night, in all sorts of weather, to make his rounds." This is proving that the mistress and master did not care about the dog. They would not care if it was a hurricane, they would not care if there was a tornado. They would set the dog out.

The family members in the story treat their dogs with respect. They help the dogs enhance their talents. For example, "the tricks he had taught himself without human tutelage." This detail portrays that Boy helped Wolf enhance his talent. Another example of this is, "Lad and Bruce had been winning prize after prize at one local dog show after another." This detail demonstrates that Lad’s and Bruce’s talents were enhanced a lot. Thus, the dogs were treated with respect.

. This shows that Wolf’s relationships with the family are great. For example, they all love Wolf. Another example is they all get along and wolf makes them feel safe and they make Wolf feel safe.

I think that the relationship with the dog and the narrator is very good because “for the first 6 months of his life wolf lived at the place on sufferance. Nobody except the boy took any special interest I him “

Also, because the narrator decided to make the dog a guard dog and guard dogs are meant to protect
They treat their dog like a king by bringing him to talent shows and treating him like a darling.

This statement shows that the relationships between the dog and the owners is good and bad. One reason is because the master and mistress would leave the dog to die but the boy would risk his life for the dog. Another reason the boy loves the dog is because he would risk his relationship with his parents to keep the dog and keep it healthy and safe.

I think that the family members’ relationship with the dog is good. One reason is it shows that the boy has always had care for wolf. Another reason is their relationship is good because he is a watch dog, so he Tries to always protect.
Appendix I

Lesson Plan Sample: Co-Teaching Team D

1. Curriculum Standard(s) – Identify the curriculum standards to be taught, connect to other standards within or outside of discipline.

CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.5.NBT.B.7
Add, subtract, multiply, and divide decimals to hundredths, using concrete models or drawings and strategies based on place value, properties of operations, and/or the relationship between addition and subtraction; relate the strategy to a written method and explain the reasoning used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1
Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

2. Student/Class Profile – Identify any accommodations in instruction to meet student learning needs.

Participant 8 is the general education side and Participant 7 is the special education side of an ICT class of 26 students. The class consists of 10 students with IEPs, 1 declassified student, 3 English Language Learners and 1 former English Language Learner. Two students are currently approved to be evaluated and another student is currently being brought up to the RTI team. We collaboratively plan all lessons, including necessary modifications, accommodations, and enrichment, to ensure we are addressing the needs of all of our students based upon our knowledge of them, their needs, and their IEPs. We plan on continuing to provide a positive, welcoming, and organized learning environment for our students. Additionally, we utilized technological resources and other engaging aspects in all of our lessons to ensure our students are reaching their full potential.

3. Learning Outcomes – Identify the important concepts and skills that students will be expected to learn.

Students will be able to solve real world problems involving decimal addition and subtraction.

Students will be able to collaborate effectively with their peers

4. Assessments – Identify the formative and/or summative assessments used to determine student progress towards achieving the learning outcomes of the lesson

Students will be assessed throughout the lesson through teacher questioning based on our observations. Additionally, during the gradual release of responsibility, students will apply the
strategy taught to real-world problems that are similar to the activity they will be completing independently. Students will be turning and talking to their peers throughout the lesson. Students will be applying their knowledge of adding and subtracting decimals to real-world situations. We will use their performance on this assignment to guide future instruction and determine whether further guidance and instruction is needed on the topic. Once students are finished with their assignment, they will be completing an Exit Ticket that is attached to their independent assignment. Students will be asked to rate their understanding of the lesson on a scale of 1-4. Furthermore, students will complete an exit ticket applying a discount to a receipt. Student performance on the exit ticket as a form of assessment and this will also be used to guide future instruction.

5. Cognitive Engagement – Include: Warm-up or opening of lesson, activities to engage students in the intended learning outcomes, closure activity.

1. Lesson Introduction
   ● We will introduce the learning objective of the lesson, as well expectations for the lesson and activity. The objectives will also be displayed on the Google Slideshow at all times.
   ● We will have students stand if they have ever eaten at a food truck before.
   ● We will review the strategy for solving word problems, CUBES.
     ○ Learning objective: I can solve real world problems involving decimal addition and subtraction. ○ Strategy: CUBES is used to determine the steps utilized in solving word problems
       ■ Circle key numbers and units.
       ■ Underline the question.
       ■ Box math ‘action words’.
       ■ Evaluate the steps needed to solve.
       ■ Solve.

2. Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (I do, We do, You do)
   ● I Do
     ○ Students will see a menu from a food truck with an accompanying word problem, similar to the problems within their independent assignment.
     ○ We will read out the word problem and model the implementation of CUBES.
       ○ We will demonstrate the strategy and model our thinking aloud.
       ■ What are the important key numbers and units in this word problem?
         ■ What is the question we are answering?
         ■ What are the math ‘action words’ within the problem?
         ■ What are the steps needed to solve?
     ○ We will solve the problem using addition and subtraction of decimals.

   ● We Do
     ○ Students will see a menu from a food truck with an accompanying word problem, similar to the problems within their independent assignment.
     ○ We will read out the word problem and implement CUBES with student assistance.
       ■ Students will assist us in solving the problem together.
       ■ After completing the first step of the problem, we will have students use post-its to complete the 2nd step of the problem. They will put their post-it on the parking lot at the
front of the room to hold them accountable.

- Students will be asked an extension question beyond the word problem “If they wanted to order the same lunch tomorrow, would they have enough money left?” to further their thinking. They will turn and talk with their table members.

- You do (Independent)
  - Students will be doing a “Food Truck Math” activity.
  - They will be utilizing an interactive Google Slideshow and will be given a menu to “ATK’s Decimal Burger Bus”
  - They will utilize the menu to answer various questions involving their trip to the Food Truck!
  - They will use the CUBES strategy to solve real world problems involving decimal addition and subtraction.
  - Teachers will monitor student performance using the Relay tool and by observing students as they work. We will support and guide throughout the activity as necessary.
  - A group of students will be pulled to work on the activity with a teacher.

3. Lesson Closure

- After completing the independent practice, students will click the arrow within their assignment to an exit ticket.
  - Students will rate their understanding on a scale of 1-4.
  - Students will complete an exit ticket applying a discount to their receipt.
  - The exit ticket is scaffolded depending upon the student.

6. Adjustments/Modifications – Identify ways in which you may adjust the lesson if formative assessments warrant modification.

Students were assigned different levels of the “Food Truck Math” activity. The strategy learned will be applied to real world word problems based on our knowledge of our students, data from the iReady diagnostic, the NWEA assessment, and the needs listed in their IEPs. We created four different levels of the activity and exit ticket and there is student choice incorporated within the activity. In the two lowest levels, there will be audio of the directions and any word problems. Additionally, students will be working with less menu items when solving problems, as well as numbers that require less regrouping. The highest level activity has an additional enrichment word problem, as well as more problems involving regrouping, and a larger amount of menu items that students are working with.

Groups – How students will be grouped for each activity of the lesson.

Students are assigned a leveled “Food Truck Math” activity based on their iReady diagnostic and their NWEA assessment. During the lesson, we will pull certain students to complete the assignment at the back table and receive support as needed. Additionally, the next day, students will meet in small groups to discuss their purchases from the “ATK Decimal Burger Bus”, and compare their spending. We will create these groups based on our observations from this lesson, their performance on their independent assignment, and our knowledge of our students.
Appendix J

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

DATE: April 26, 2022
TO: Jenna Marie Theofield
FROM: Molloy College IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [1677656-1] I do, you do, we do: Co-teachers’ perspectives of self-determination for students with dis/abilities
REFERENCE #: 
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: April 26, 2022
EXPIRATION DATE: April 25, 2023
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy College IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UIIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of April 25, 2023.
Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

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.