EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN EDUCATIONAL SPACES

by

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

There is an emerging body of research that is prioritizing the voices of students with disabilities at the post-secondary level, this is often missing in K-12 contexts, in order for educational environments to fully reflect the lived-experiences of students with disabilities, we need to hear directly from students with disabilities themselves. While university-level research centers the voices of disabled students and highlights the importance of belonging and peer relationships, K-12 studies often prioritize perspectives of adults, emphasizing advocacy and support. The purpose of this study was to explore the K-12 educational lived-experiences of students with disabilities. In using narrative inquiry, and open-ended interviews, student voices were centered. Participants included five adults, aged 20-30, who self-identified as having a disability and who had experience in special education from K-12. Five themes emerged from the narrative interviews: (1) Lack of a sense of belonging, (2) Learning life lessons earlier than peers, (3) Support systems, (4) Impact of Special Education Services, and (5) Times of transition. Narrative interviews allowed for a richness and depth in the findings. These findings can be used as a starting point for lived experience to inform special-education policy and practice.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Val Matthew and Scott Armstrong, for always encouraging my love of learning, and reminding me to take things one step at a time.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

In exploring inclusion in schools and communities, the voices of individuals with disabilities are not often considered (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013), even when accommodations for participation can be made (Feldman et al., 2013). Historically, research in the field of Special Education has been done about individuals with disabilities rather than research being done in collaboration with disability communities. Only in recent years have the voices of students with disabilities begun to be centered in the context of educational research (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013; Liddiard et al., 2019). The absence of a disability perspective results in a limited understanding of how to build inclusive environments and how to support individuals of all abilities to succeed in schools and community settings.

My thesis contributes to the growing body of knowledge in which individuals with disabilities ultimately inform inclusive education policy and practices. The purpose of this study is to inform inclusive education practices and policies by learning from the experiences and stories of disabled individuals through narrative interviews. These concepts are commonly explored at the K-12 level through the perspectives of teachers, and parents or caregivers of students with disabilities through mixed-methods approaches and explored at the university-level through the perspectives of students with disabilities through interview methods. What is missing is exploring these concepts at the K-12 level through perspectives of students with disabilities. This study retroactively explores the lived-experiences of students with disabilities across their K-12 education. My thesis addresses the following question(s): (a) What are the lived-experiences of individuals with disabilities in special education through K-12? (b) What are success stories in K-12 special education? And (c) What are the stories of challenges in K-12 special education?

Positionality Statement

Berger (2015) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in the research process, noting that it is important to examine our own position within the research. Where I grew up, my social position and the lens through which I view the world all impact the way I conduct research, the way I ask questions and the way I interpret findings. These components of my being impact the way I move through the world and the way I enter different spaces. I grew up on the land of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples, Tiohtià:ke, now known as Montreal. I moved to the traditional land of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) and WSÁNEĆ peoples, now known as Victoria, in 2022. I am a white settler on these lands, and am privileged to live, work and play here. I experience this privilege as a result of the continued treatment of Indigenous people on this land. As I reflect on my position as a white settler on unceded lands, I realize that this is not a privilege I have always been aware of, and that is a privilege in and of itself. For most of my life, I lived only with an understanding of my own personal identities, it is only in my adult years that I have begun to understand the way all of my identities shape the way that I move through the world.

My identity as a queer, neurodivergent, woman has impacted the way I have moved through various educational spaces. While my neurodivergence has presented me with some social barriers, I have not experienced the barriers to education that students with disabilities, and other neurodiverse folks face. I enter educational spaces with the privilege of knowing that I will be represented, and that the typical framework of a classroom does not have inherent barriers that I will have to face. In coming into this work, this is something I have reflected on. My experiences in the classroom, and my experience growing up with a sibling with a learning disability inform the way I form questions, the way I interact with literature and the way I think about disability and education.

Models of Disability

Historically, special-education research has been done *about* disabled students, rather than *with* disabled students. This same research has used the medical model of disability as the foundational framing of disability. The medical model asserts that disability is an individual deficit and is not related to social, cultural, or political factors, that disability and the experience of being disabled is not impacted by social, cultural, or political factors (Barnes, 2019; Matthews, 2009; Marks, 1997). The medical model implies that individuals with the same disability require the same supports and have the same needs (Barnes, 2019; Matthews, 2009). The medical model uses ableist assumptions to understand disability. Hehir (2002) discusses the many definitions of ableism in relation to education. Hehir (2002) notes that the reviewed definitions of ableism share their roots in the discrimination and oppression of individuals with disabilities. Capturing the commonalities between various definitions, Hehir (2002) defines ableism as the “devaluation of disability” (p. 1). In an educational context, Hehir (2002) notes that it is expected and preferred that children with disabilities complete tasks and behave in the same way as children without disabilities. For example, the assumption is made that it is better to “speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check” (Hehir, 2002, p. 3). In operating with ableist assumptions, disability is viewed as something individual, and something to be fixed. In operating with ableist assumptions, disability is viewed as an inherent deficit with no room for strengths. The research using this model instead focuses on how disability is an individual deficit (Barnes, 2019; Matthews, 2009; Marks, 1997). In the use of this model in research, there is little room to explore the experiences of disabled students in a holistic way. Students with disabilities are not provided the space to voice their stories and perspectives.

Oliver (1983), as cited in Oliver (2013) first introduced the Social Model of Disability, drawing from the work of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). The Social Model of Disability was introduced in the field of Disability Studies. This model considers impairment and disability as two distinct terms. Impairments are what an individual has difficulty with, and it is society that imposes disability on the individual (Barnes, 2019; Oliver, 1983 as cited in Oliver 2013). The Social Model of disability differed from how disability had been framed in research up until that point. It shifted from framing disability as a medical problem to be fixed or cured, to understanding disability as restrictions placed on individuals by societal norms (Gallagher, Connor & Ferri, 2014). This shift comes with the understanding that an individuals' experiences are tied to the social and cultural values of their environment (Gallagher, Connor & Ferri, 2014). It is important to note that the Social Model of disability does not discount the importance of individual supports however those present, rather it shifts the focus from individual limitations to understanding disability as both a social and an individual experience (Barnes, 2019).

More recently, the social model of disability is commonly used as the theoretical framework that supports research exploring the experiences of students with disabilities within the Disability Studies field. For example, Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) explored how ableism and disability interact in higher education. They explore features of higher education as actively disabling students and staff of a university. For example, physical features that create inaccessible spaces such as stairs being the only entrance into a building. They also discuss values held in higher education such as productiveness, and completing tasks in a very specific way which can also impose barriers. Research exploring the perspectives of students with disabilities reflects the ideas of the Social Model in that the emphasis is placed on institutional, social and cultural factors, and emphasizes the lived experiences of people with disabilities through interview methods. Within the Social Model of disability, the institutional, social and cultural impacts on students with disabilities in educational spaces and inclusion are commonly addressed. The Social Model of Disability has gained traction within the Disability Studies field but has yet to inform Special and Inclusive Education research, policy, and practice in the same way, with much of the research focusing on parent, teacher, and caregiver perspectives through interviews and mixed methods approaches.

Educational Research

Disability Studies

Research in the field of Disability Studies prioritizes the voices and perspectives of individuals with disabilities, providing invaluable insights the educational experiences of disabled students. Much of the reviewed research is done using interview methods which allows space for individuals with disabilities to share their experiences, and for these experiences to inform educational practice. This research is primarily done with adults or university-age students with disabilities. The field of Disability Studies emerged as a response to issues in research done on disability in other fields and as the academic piece of the disability rights movement (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Linton, 1998). For example, within the field of Special Education, disability is often framed from an individualized, deficit-based approach, where disability is often seen as a problem to be fixed (Linton, 1998). The field of Disability Studies is a socio-political-cultural exploration of disability, rather than an intervention approach (Linton, 1998).

Albanesi (2017) explored the exclusion of students with disabilities in educational research through their presidential address to the Western Social Science Association. Albanesi (2017) details their personal story in engaging in Disability Studies, noting their realization that Disability Studies was missing from the intersectional framework they had been teaching in graduate social theories courses. Only recently has research begun to understand the value of the perspectives of students with disabilities (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013; Liddiard et al., 2019). From the lived experience of students with disabilities prioritized in the field of Disability Studies, through qualitative methods, including semi-structured and life story interviews, we have learned about accommodations and supports in higher education institutions that are not being provided (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016; Holloway, 2001; Vickerman & Blundell, 2011). We have also learned about social factors that impact feelings of support and inclusion in higher education institutions, for example close peer relationships and classroom culture (Gibson, 2012; Tews and Lupart, 2008). Providing space for students with disabilities to share their lived experiences can provide invaluable insights that can inform policy and practice. While the research in the field of Disability Studies is informed by individuals with disabilities, in the field of Special Education, parent or caregiver, and teacher perspectives are prioritized (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Burke et al., 2019; Domingo-Martos et al., 2022; Harkins et al., 2022).

Special Education

Typically, in special education research, a medical model of disability is used as a theoretical framework or grounding point for understanding disability where disability is tied to a person’s ability to learn (Ahram et al., 2021; Nieminen, 2024). In using the medical model of disability, special education uses ableist assumptions to understand disability as something to be ‘fixed’ (Nieminen, 2024). In this work, educators, caregivers and administrators are often whose voices are amplified and valued (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Burke et al., 2019; Domingo-Martos et al., 2022; Harkins et al., 2022). Special education services in Canada typically include an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) where school curriculum is adapted, and specialized instruction either within the general education classroom, or in a different learning space (Francisco et al., 20210).

Chapter Summary

Historically, special education has used the medical model of disability as the foundational framing of disability (Ahram et al., 2021; Nieminen, 2024). The Medical model of disability uses ableist assumptions in understanding disability as an individual deficit and something to be fixed. This model also suggests that disability is not impacted by social, cultural, or political factors (Barnes, 2019; Matthews, 2009; Marks, 1997). The social model of disability shifted this framing and understands disability as being tied to the social cultural and political values of an environment. In this model, disability is framed with the understanding of restrictions placed on individuals through societal and cultural norms and values Barnes, 2019; Gallagher, Connor & Ferri, 2014; Oliver, 1983 as cited in Oliver 2013). Research in the field of disability studies often uses the social model as a theoretical framework (Fullarton & Duquette, 2016; Gibson, 2012; Holloway, 2001; Tews and Lupart, 2008; Vickerman & Blundell, 2011) The field of disability studies prioritizes the voices and perspectives of disabled people, often through interview methods. The Special Education field often uses the medical model, where disability is often framed from an individualized, deficit-based approach (Linton, 1998).

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

Historically, special education research has been informed by educators, caregivers and administrators, and disabled students have been excluded from the research process (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013; Liddiard et al., 2019). However, more recently, there is a growing body of research that is prioritizing the voices of students with disabilities as a way of developing special education policy and practice, although more research is needed (McNulty, 2003; Nevill & Forsey, 2022; Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009. Qualitative methodologies, including narrative approaches, often centre student voice and student experience and allow for more nuance and depth in the understanding of students' experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crossley, 2007; Kramp, 2003; Moen, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). When we value and prioritize disabled students' voices, particularly through narrative methodologies, sense of belonging, the impacts of special education services, and the importance of times of transition are emphasized as important contributors to the overall educational experience (Pesonen et al., 2016; Cullinane, 2020; Pitt et al., 2021; Little et al., 2022).

Inclusion in the Research

The literature on the inclusion of students with disabilities in research demonstrates that students with disabilities are often excluded from research done in the general classroom and from general developmental research, despite accommodations being possible (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013; Liddiard et al., 2019). The lived experiences of disabled students are not often prioritized. Feldman and colleagues (2013) conducted a review of child development research, analyzing 533 articles for the inclusion of children with disabilities. Articles were selected from two top-tier developmental journals, *Child Development* and *Developmental Psychology*, and were published between 1996 and 2010. Over half of the reviewed studies made no explicit mention of children with disabilities or excluded children with disabilities when accommodations could have been made. More specifically, only 54 of the 533 studies reviewed clearly included children with disabilities. Most studies provided no reasoning for the exclusion of children with disabilities. According to the raters, over half of the studies that did not explicitly include children with disabilities “could have included them with no additional accommodations to the study’s methodology” (Feldman et al., 2013, p. 1004). The studies that did provide reasoning did not consider possible accommodations for children with disabilities.

Liddiard and colleagues (2019) explore the policies and practices guiding research co-produced with young people with disabilities, collaborating with young women with disabilities as co-authors of this research. Children with disabilities are not often included in the research process, and when children with disabilities are included, the research is typically deficit oriented. The authors emphasize the importance of including the disability community in the research process. They specifically note providing virtual opportunities for engaging the research process, such as conducting interviews virtually, discussing with stakeholders and community members through virtual meetings, and supporting research design through virtual meetings. In recent years, some research has emphasized the value of the perspectives of students with disabilities and has focused on researching with the community primarily through qualitative methodologies.

Student Voices in Educational Research

When students with disabilities are included in research, it is often at the post-secondary level and through qualitative methods. Narrative inquiry is an approach to qualitative research where people are storytellers, and individual experiences are shared and explored within their broader social context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crossley, 2007; Kramp, 2003; Moen, 2006;

Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Narrative inquiry has been used to better understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities, specifically dyslexia (McNulty, 2003; Nevill & Forsey, 2022; Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009). However, additional, and more current research is needed in this area.

In a more recent study, Nevill and Forsey (2022) used a life story approach to understand the experiences of two university students between 18 and 23 years old with dyslexia. The stories told by participants emphasized an education system that did not fully address their needs (Nevill & Forsey, 2022). Both participants expressed that their teachers were underprepared and underqualified to support students with dyslexia. Due to the lack of services and support provided by their schools, students, and their families, were left to support and advocate for their own learning. Beyond the lack of support, one participant explained the negative experience of their teacher mocking and teasing them, leading them to feel worthless and undervalued at school. It was the space that students were provided with to share their stories that allowed these findings to be discussed.

Similarly, Stampoltzis and Polychronopoulou (2009) conducted interviews with Greek students with dyslexia to explore their educational experiences. Students were between 19 and 26 years old and were all in higher education. Interviews explored how students "experienced school, peer relations, labeling, family support, university, self-esteem and how they made their future plans" (p. 307) using three sets of questions exploring past experiences, present difficulties and future goals and expectations (Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009). Several themes emerged, including negative past experiences, such as a lack of understanding from teachers and feeling lazy and incompetent, particularly in elementary school. These experiences led participants to feel othered. Despite these feelings of a lack of belonging, participants also explained that their relationships with their peers were largely positive, explaining that they were able to have fun and get along with their classmates. Participants also noted improvements after having received a diagnosis (Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009). Through interview methods, participants shared all facets of their educational journey, both positive and negative. These methods allowed for the nuance and complexity of these individuals' stories to emerge.

McNulty (2003) explored the life stories of adults with dyslexia who had been diagnosed in childhood or early adolescence. Narrative analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts. Several common themes emerged, including the feeling of being inferior to others, and feelings of low self-esteem. The findings from individual life-stories were woven together to form a collective story which demonstrated the importance of identifying learning disabilities in early childhood, as participants reported being aware of their learning disability, or feeling as if "something's wrong with [them]" (p.378) by elementary school and this led to lower self-esteem (McNulty, 2003). These findings were brought to light through narrative inquiry where participants were asked to share their lived experiences. The narratives told by the participants in the reviewed studies demonstrate an optimistic story of growth throughout their education. These findings are in line with previous research suggesting that students with dyslexia face challenges in the elementary years (McNulty, 2003). Narrative inquiry allowed for an addition to this story with notable growth being reported throughout the adult years (Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009).

Narrative inquiry is a methodology in which individuals share their lived experiences which, as demonstrated by these studies, can have valuable insights for inclusive education policy and practice. Qualitative methods allowed for participants to share their holistic experiences, and to explain how their lived experiences changed over time. Participants in the reviewed studies emphasize a lack of a sense of belonging, the impact of the support and services they received in school, and the differences in their experiences between levels of education (McNulty, 2003; Nevill & Forsey, 2022; Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009). Currently, when exploring these experiences, parents, teachers and administration are whose voices are prioritized. The findings that emerge from others' perspectives lack the nuance and richness that is learned from the voices of disabled students themselves. The information learned from the perspectives of students with disabilities is invaluable in understanding how to develop and maintain a sense of belonging in school.

Belonging

Sense of belonging for students with disabilities is becoming an increasingly prominent area of study and can have significant impacts on students' experiences in school academically, socially and emotionally. Goodenow (1993) describes students' sense of belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Sense of belonging in school has been seen to have significant impacts on students' motivation, school engagement, and academic outcomes (Cullinane, 2020; Goodenow, 1993; Pesonen et al., 2016). More specifically, research examining sense of belonging for students with disabilities through qualitative approaches is growing.

In using a qualitative approach, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of disabled students' experiences of belonging. When disabled students are asked about their experiences of belonging in school, positive relationships with educators, teaching assistants, and other adults in the school are explained as positive contributors (Cullinane, 2020; Pesonen et al., 2016). Despite these contributors, students with disabilities display lower levels of belonging than students without (Cullinane, 2020). Social and academic barriers to developing a sense of belonging are highlighted in qualitative interviews with students with disabilities. Bullying, less involvement in extracurricular activities, and negative peer interactions including feelings of rejection and isolation are described by students with disabilities as social barriers (Cullinane, 2020; Pesonen et al., 2016). Through qualitative interviews, students with disabilities note frequent changes in educational settings due to unmet support needs, which does not allow for enough time to develop feelings of belonging, and academic difficulties are identified as barriers (Cullinane, 2020; Pesonen et al., 2016). The space created for disabled students to share their stories and experiences through qualitative methods allows for a richer understanding that perhaps cannot be gained through quantitative methods. Qualitative or narrative methodology also allows for students to share their daily experiences which shape their broader experiences within school, which often include student experience with special education supports.

Impact of Special Education Services

The literature on special education supports demonstrates the importance of inclusivity in classroom spaces, making progress towards goals, having positive peer interactions, and matching supports to the needs of students. In this work, teachers are often identified as a critical factor in inclusion in the classroom (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Domingo-Martos et. al., 2022). Many studies explore teacher perspectives on inclusion in the classroom (Skårbrevik, 2005; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Purdue, 2009). When exploring the quality of peer-support programs between students with and without disabilities, educators describe the programs as being effective in terms of disabled students' increase in interaction in the classroom and progress towards individualized goals set by a special educator (Brock et al., 2016). Based on these evaluations, peer support programs are seen to be successful. Although these elements of special education support are often highlighted by educators, caregivers and administrators, the voices of students with disabilities themselves are often missing in the design and evaluation of these supports. However, the students with disabilities receiving the support were not provided space to share their experiences and perspectives with the support.

Similarly, evaluations of special education services in Norway are focused on the usefulness of the program in relation to the needs of the students, how the programs contributed to social inclusion, and how equitable the programs were (Skårbrevik, 2005). However, once again these evaluations are coming from the perspectives of teachers, parents, school administrators and school psychological service providers. Assessments of the programs should include the students utilizing the services and engaging in the programs. Kozleski and colleagues (2021) explored the perspectives of teachers, principals, and students without disabilities on an inclusive, early literacy intervention, delivered in general education classrooms. Through focus groups and interviews, the authors found that, in general, teachers, principals and students without disabilities held positive views towards the inclusive literacy program. Participants specifically mentioned students with disabilities academic being a result of the literacy program. Although this was a program designed for students with disabilities, these students were not provided the space to share their perspectives and experiences. When assessing the quality of inclusive education programs or exploring perspectives on inclusion, it is critical to prioritize the voices of students with disabilities; however, this is not commonly seen in special education research with many studies emphasizing the voices of teachers and parents.

Burke and colleagues (2019) interviewed parents of and advocates for students with disabilities whose ages ranged from 7 to 21. Overall, families and advocates felt the advocacy process was positive and reported similar advocacy activities. All of the parents noted that they contacted an advocate when they encountered a challenge with the school, for example, the school refusing to listen to the concerns of a parent regarding a student's academic progress. Advocates and parents reported working together to be members of the child's individualized education program (IEP), although the student themself was not a part of this team. Overall, families and advocates reported positive reactions from schools to having a special education advocate working with families. The authors note that future research may emphasize the perspectives of students with disabilities on their experiences with advocates and their experiences with self-advocacy. When exploring the impacts of Special Education supports and services from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and advocates, themes surrounding the success of these supports emerge. Success in this case, appears as making progress towards goals, having positive peer interactions, and programs matching the needs of students (Skårbrevik, 2005; Brock et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2019).

Recently, research at the elementary school level has started to consider student perspectives. Little and colleagues (2022) report the results from three international studies, conducted by the authors, from Australia, Indonesia, and the Netherlands, which all aimed to explore special education practices through the perspectives of students with disabilities. Across all three studies, participants highlighted the importance of social inclusion and acceptance. Participants described social inclusion as having friends, sitting next to their peers, engaging in play with their peers, and feeling liked by their peers (Little et al., 2022). Participants in these studies also expressed challenges relating to special education services. Students with disabilities shared conflicting experiences with special education classrooms, explaining that while being removed from the general educational classroom and moved to the special education classroom was helpful academically, it also led to feelings of isolation and exclusion (Little et al., 2022). In explaining the social and community experiences at school, disabled students expressed a desire to be more involved in school-wide activities and events and participate in the planning of these activities to demonstrate their strengths (Little et al., 2022).

While educators, caregivers and administrators emphasized the importance of academic progress and peer support, disabled students themselves highlighted the need for inclusion within the broader school community, as well as opportunity to participate in designing activities and events at school (Brock et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2019; Little et al., 2022; Skårbrevik, 2005). Special education supports may also differ between different levels of schooling or different schools themselves (Hanson et al., 200; Harkins et al., 2022; Pitt et al., 2021).

Transition

Times of transition between educational levels (e.g., preschool to elementary school, or high school to post-secondary school) can present distinct challenges for disabled students. Among younger students, there is a lack of literature from the perspectives of students with disabilities that explores the factors that contribute to times of transition. However, the concept of transition is commonly considered from the perspectives of teachers, support staff and parents. In exploring the transition from preschool to the early elementary years for children with disabilities, parents noted that their children moved from inclusive education preschools into specific special education spaces when they entered formal schooling (Hanson et al., 2001). It is noted that the shift from inclusive general education spaces (educational spaces with disabled and non-disabled students) to specific special education spaces (educational spaces where disabled students were separated from their non-disabled classmates) was a choice made by professionals and parents (Hanson et al., 2001). Families and professionals noted three reasons for this shift, including the behaviour of typically developing peers towards children with disabilities, teachers' lack of experience working with students with disabilities, and elementary schools approaching disability through a deficit-based lens (Hanson et al., 2001). These reasons all emphasize reducing potential or perceived harm to students with disabilities and do not identify ways that students with disabilities can best demonstrate their knowledge and contribute to the classroom environment. While parental influence is important at these younger ages, asking students for their input ensures that their voices are being heard.

Times of transition can also be considered in terms of changing schools or altering methods of instruction. For example, Harkins and colleagues (2022) explored the changes to special education services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported being satisfied with the quality of services provided. However, they also reported an overall reduction in services, and that individualized education plans were not adapted to online learning (Harkins et al., 2022). The students accessing the services were not asked for their opinions despite being the people experiencing the shift in special education services and special education first-hand throughout the pandemic. When exploring times of transition from the perspectives of parents and teachers, the lens is typically deficits based. The findings that emerge detail the reasons for transition being negative, and emphasize the challenges associated with that transition (Hanson et al., 2001; Harkin et al., 2022).

More recently, the transition from elementary school to high school has begun to be explored through the voices of students with disabilities. Pitt and colleagues (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students with disabilities in Australia, one year prior to entering high school. During these interviews, students were asked about what they thought high school would be like, as well as their current experiences in school. All of the participants were taking part in a transition program offered by the high school they would be attending. A second round of interviews were conducted nearing the end of the students’ first semesters of high school. The participants expressed that their relationships with their peers and teachers were especially important in having a positive transition into high school. Overall, most participants reported a positive transition experience due to visiting the physical environment of the school beforehand and positive social relationships with peers and teachers. Students were provided the space to share their stories and include both successes and challenges related to their transition experiences. This holistic understanding of a transition between elementary and high school would not be possible through different methods.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of the current research is to retroactively explore the lived-experiences of students with disabilities across their K-12 education. This thesis complements the growing body of research that does explore the lived experiences of disabled students, but typically at the university-level. Students highlight the importance of having a sense of belonging, the impact of special education services and supports, and times of transition (Pesonen et al., 2016; Cullinane, 2020; Pitt et al., 2021; Little et al., 2022). At the K-12 level, research tends to prioritize the voices of educators, caregivers, and administrators, with recent research beginning to prioritize the voices of disabled students. However, this work focuses on one level of education. Educators, caregivers, and administrators highlight the importance of positive peer interactions, progressing towards goals, and services offered matching student needs (Hanson et al., 2001; Skårbrevik, 2005; Brock et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2019; Harkin et al., 2022). These findings are typically approached from a deficit-based lens, emphasizing the struggles that students with disabilities face and not acknowledging the successes. What is missing is the perspectives of students with disabilities on their experience through K-12. These perspectives can be explored through narrative interviews, as seen in previous work exploring the lived experiences of students with disabilities. In prioritizing the voices of disabled students when exploring the K-12 experience, this study offers a starting point for future research to allow disabled students voices to guide practice in special education from K-12.

My thesis explores the following research questions: (a) What are the lived-experiences of individuals with disabilities in special education through K-12? (b) What are success stories in K-12 special education? And (c) What are the stories of challenges in K-12 special education?

Chapter Summary

Existing special education literature is typically informed by educators, caregivers, and administrators, while disabled students are excluded from the research process (Albanesi, 2017; Feldman et al., 2013; Liddiard et al., 2019). When disabled students are included, it is typically at the university or post-secondary level (McNulty, 2003; Nevill & Forsey, 2022; Pitt et al., 2021; Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009). Though there is an emerging body of research exploring the experiences of students with disabilities at the K-12 level, although more research is needed (Little et al., 2022). When disabled students are asked about their educational experiences, sense of belonging, impact of special education services, and times of transition are emphasized as meaningful contributors to this experience (Cullinane, 2020; Little, et al., 2022; Pesonen et al., 2016; Pitt et al., 2021). In exploring the impact of special education services, educators, caregivers, and administrators emphasized the importance of academic progress and peer support while students with disabilities explained how isolating this experience can be, and the need for inclusion within the classroom and school community (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Domingo-Martos et. al., 2022; Little et al., 2022). Times of transition are often identified as an especially challenging time for students with disabilities by educators, caregivers and administrators (Hanson et al., 2001; Harkin et al., 2022). Students with disabilities explore times of transition through a more holistic lens, noting the successes and challenges related to transition experiences (Pitt et al., 2022). There is a difference in what is seen when we ask educators, caregivers and administrators about the experiences of disabled students and when we ask students with disabilities about their lived experiences. My thesis contributes to the emerging body of research exploring the lived experiences of students with disabilities in K-12 special education.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Narrative inquiry is an approach to qualitative research that not only allows for an understanding of individual experience, but also experience within a broader social context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crossley, 2007; Kramp, 2003; Moen, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In narrative inquiry, there is an emphasis on stories, which allows for individuals to share their experiences and the meaning they assign to those experiences. This approach also allows for connections to be drawn between experiences, rather than specific experiences being viewed as isolated events (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crossley, 2007; Kramp, 2003; Moen, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Narrative inquiry can be especially meaningful in disability studies (Moen, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Following a narrative research design, my thesis explored the following research questions: (a) What are the lived-experiences of individuals with disabilities in special education through K-12? (b) What are success stories in K-12 special education? And (c) What are the stories of challenges in K-12 special education?

Research Design

This exploratory, qualitative study sought the reflective perspectives of students with disabilities on their K-12 educational experiences through narrative interviews. Narrative inquiry allows for an understanding of the lived experiences of disabled students and provides an opportunity for individuals to share stories of challenge and stories of success. The data collected is used to construct an understanding of students with disabilities' lived experiences throughout their education.

Participants

Approved by the Human ethics office of research services at the University of Victoria, I interviewed 5 adults, ages 20 to 30, who self-identify as having a disability and who have experience with special education from K-12. Age, gender identity, race, ethnicity, Indigenous status, nationality, highest level of education completed, and disability were noted participant characteristics. Participants' previous and current educational contexts emerged in the interview process (Table 1.). Adult participants can reflect on their educational path as a whole and identify pivotal moments or turning points in that path (Rosenthal, 2004). The adult that is living in the present has experiences and perspectives that can impact how they retell their past (Rosenthal, 2004). Life history interviews allow individuals to draw connections across their lives, from childhood until the present (Ritchie, 2003 as cited in Roulstone, 2010). Interviewing adult participants and exploring their reflections allows for this connection to be drawn.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Participant pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Highest level of education achieved	Previous educational context	Current educational context	Disability
Sam	30	Canadian	High school	Public school	Not a current student	ADHD, Anxiety, PTSD, OCD

Sarah	28	Canadian	College	Montessori, Private school, Public school	Not a current student	Dyslexia
Michael	20	Canadian	High school	Public school	Current university student	Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy
John	28	Canadian	College	Public school	Not a current student	ADHD, Dyslexia
Emma	21	Canadian	High school	Public school	Current university student	Dyslexia

Recruitment

I employed two sampling methods to recruit participants: purposeful sampling, and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is a commonly used sampling method in qualitative research which involves selecting specific, information-rich cases that are knowledgeable about a particular experience (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were recruited through email and flyers distributed by the Society for Students with Disabilities (SSD) and the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) at the University of Victoria, snowball sampling, social media, and personal contacts. Snowball sampling involves participants identifying other potential participants (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). I created the recruitment materials to be distributed. Flyers and emails contained the purpose of the project, and an explanation of what participation entails (see Appendix A). Potential participants were invited to complete an initial survey indicating their name, age, address, if they have experience with special education and if they identify as having a disability to express their interest.

Procedure

Data collection occurred one point in time and consisted of narrative interviews with participants. Narrative interviews explore people's personal life stories and how they relate to their social context (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016) identified four steps in the narrative interview process: (1) introduction and explanations about the research, (2) the narrative, (3) the questioning phase, and (4) conclusions. In the first stage, I introduced myself and explained the interview process, including audio recording and confirming consent. In the second stage, I began with an open-ended question that allowed participants to freely recount their story about their experience in K-12 special education. The third phase involved prompting participants for clarification or expansion on different parts of their story. The fourth phase is the conclusion to the interview where I asked participants if they wanted to share anything else and explained the next steps of the research process which included transcribing the interviews, creating short summaries and returning them to participants for review.

The interview guide was developed by the research team and includes questions pertaining to individuals' experiences in educational spaces (see Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 34 and 41 minutes. Audio recordings of interviews were made. Four interviews took place on Zoom, and one interview took place in person. The interviews that took place on Zoom were recorded using the Zoom recording feature. The interview that took place in person was recorded on a cellphone app. All audio recordings were transferred to the University of Victoria's OneDrive. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically using a narrative analysis approach.

Participants were emailed the consent form prior to their interview time. Before starting the interview, I reviewed the consent form with participants, ensuring that everything was clear, and participants were aware that they could withdraw at any time or refrain from answering any questions. Informed, written consent was obtained from all participants prior to beginning each interview. Participants were left with a copy of the consent form (see Appendix C).

Approach to Qualitative Analysis

Audio interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Audio recordings were uploaded to the University of Victoria's OneDrive, and transcribed using the transcription software in the OneDrive word document. Transcriptions were then be reviewed using the 5 following steps, as outlined by Lawrence and Herron (2020):

1. Listen to the entire audio recording in one sitting.
2. Note holistic impressions of the recording using bullet points, holistic impressions might include anything that stood out in the interview, tone, and notable emotions.
3. Create a document for the transcription which indicates the participant code, date of the interview, transcriptionist name, and date transcription was completed.
4. Transcribe the interview verbatim in two-minute segments, replacing any identifying information, interview questions are bolded, timestamps are added for any inaudible words or phrases, only stuttering that is meaningful is included, and relevant emotional content is included.
5. Write a one-page summary of the interview.

I then coded the data using a narrative analysis approach. Narrative analysis is a holistic approach to understanding participants' life stories (Earthy & Cronin, 2008; Kramp, 2003). Narrative analysis also involves exploring the link between personal stories and the social context in which they unfold (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Crossley (2007) identifies six analytic steps in narrative analysis:

1. Reading and familiarizing, I reread each interview transcript in its entirety to familiarize myself with and gain a holistic understanding of the individual story.
2. Identifying important concepts, I reread the one-page summary of the transcripts and noted concepts or ideas that stand out.
3. Identifying narrative tone (content and form), I identified the tone of the interview, (e.g., optimistic, pessimistic, etc.).
4. Identifying narrative themes and images, I identified recurring themes throughout the narrative, and parts of the narrative that demonstrated this theme.
5. Weaving together a cohesive story, I wrote up my interpretation of the narrative account in the 3rd person.
6. Writing up, this included my final written conclusions drawn across participants.

I checked in with participants at step 4 and step 5 to ensure that the identified narrative themes and images were aligned with participants lived experiences. Step 5 included writing up my interpretation of the narrative account (Crossley, 2007). This step was allows participants to review my understanding of their story, and how it would be presented. To ensure that participants stories were honoured, I stayed true to the way participants told their stories in content and in form. I identified impactful moments in participants stories and selected quotes to demonstrate those moments. Narrative analysis is a conversation between the researcher and the participants stories (Crossley, 2007; Earthy & Cronin, 2008; Kramp, 2003), in completing in step 5, I was able to engage in this conversation as the researcher, while also ensuring that participants stories were respected through member checking. Crossley (2007) emphasizes that these are guidelines, and narrative inquiry is a creative process that will not always fit within these defined steps.

Qualitative Rigor

Research is considered rigorous when the findings are consistent or replicable, meaning how one person analyses the data will match how a different person analyses the data (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Particularly in qualitative research, rigor is derived from a combination of the research process, the researcher and the data (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Guba (1981) proposed four criteria that indicate the rigor of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are explored further by Shenton (2005); (a) credibility, which refers to whether a study's findings are congruent with reality, (b) transferability, which refers to the applicability of the study results to other individuals, (c) dependability, where a detailed account of the study methods are provided so that the study can be repeated, and (d) confirmability, where study results come from the participants, and not the biases or subjectivity of the researcher.

To address this study's credibility, I engaged in member checks, a commonly used way of demonstrating trustworthiness in qualitative research (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2015; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2005). Member checking typically involves asking "one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (Creswell & Guetterman, p. 259, 2015). Participants may be given the raw data (e.g., interview transcripts) as well as the analysis. In engaging in member checks, participants are given the opportunity to express whether the analysis is a representation of their story that they feel comfortable sharing, they are also given the opportunity to add or change or clarify aspects of their story (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2015; Creswell & Miller, 2000). James (2018) utilized member checks in their research exploring the narrative account of a nursing student whose second language was English. The member check was completed by allowing the participant to read a draft of the manuscript to ensure the accuracy of the narrative account and the analyses (James, 2018). I engaged in member checking at stage 4 and 5 of the analysis process, identifying narrative themes and images, providing participants with the interview transcript and initial analyses. To address transferability and dependability, I provided a detailed explanation of participant characteristics, methods of data collection, and analysis. Finally, to address confirmability I completed journal entries throughout data analysis. Clarke (2021) emphasizes that coding is a subjective process in which a researcher's background, values, assumptions and experiences can impact how data is understood. I kept reflexive journal entries throughout the data analysis process. These journal entries reflect my interactions with the data, and my reflections on how my position may impact how I interacted with the data. Through reflexive journaling I was also able to understand that as the person doing these interviews, and understanding these stories, that I would inevitably have an impact on the way that they are interpreted. For example, at one point during my analysis, I found myself taking on a more negative, deficit-based tone. Understanding that I was trained in a deficit-based research lens through reflexive journaling, I noticed this bias and returned to the participant's story to ground myself in their tone and narrative.

I used these criteria of rigour primarily to reflect on how I was managing my own biases and interactions with the data. In thinking of rigour as interactions the research process, the researcher, and the data, these four criteria served as a way of ensuring that participant voices were being honoured, and as a researcher, I was staying close to participant narratives (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Member checks were utilized to ensure that I was capturing participants experiences in a way that honoured their stories. During my reflexive journaling, I reflected on the tone and style I was writing in, and reviewed participant transcripts throughout to ensure that my tone was reflective of the participant's tone. Using these criteria for rigour in qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2005) was a way to ensure that I was representing these five people's stories respectfully, and to ensure that I was amplifying their voices and not my own.

Chapter Summary

I conducted a qualitative, exploratory study, following a narrative research design exploring the experiences of disabled students in K-12 special education. My participants included 5 adults, ages 20 to 30, who self-identified as having a disability and who had experience with special education from K-12. Data was collected at one point in time through narrative interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, and engaged in narrative analysis using Crossley's (2007) six analytic steps in narrative analysis: (1) Reading and familiarizing, (2) Identifying important concepts, (3) Identifying narrative tone (content and form), (4) Identifying narrative themes and images, (5) Weaving together a cohesive story, and (6) Writing Up. Throughout my research, I engaged in four criteria to address the qualitative rigor of my study: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR: Participant Narratives

I summarized participants' narratives using the verbatim transcriptions of interviews, and the member checks sent to participants. I assigned participants pseudonyms. Four participants returned the member checks with notes, which are incorporated into their stories. One participant indicated that they had no notes. The story summaries begin with participants self-described demographic information, indicated in italics. These story summaries have direct quotes from participants, as well as notes from member checks, integrated throughout in order to fully capture participants' lived experiences.

Sam

Sam identifies as a 3*0-year-old mixed race, Black woman with ADHD, OCD, PTSD and anxiety.* Sam began her story by describing the anxiety and fear she experienced going to school as early as first grade. Sam expressed feeling deep levels of anxiety in these moments which also manifested in physical symptoms. Sam's teachers did not believe her, and did not support her through these moments:

> I remember having quite heavy anxiety, to the point where it was debilitating, or it made me like sick and the teachers wouldn't believe me until I was actually sick with an ulcer at one point. And I would get picked on more often as well.

Instead of taking the time to talk to Sam to understand her better, and what would be supportive for her in those moments, Sam's teachers assumed that calling on her in class would help bring her out of her shell, leading to even more fear and anxiety. Sam's ADHD was also not taken into account by her teachers. Sam's teachers did not have enough awareness or training to fully support her in the classroom and that this led to school not being a safe space.

> I would be sitting in class, I would kind of be the child that would be kind of very quiet and well behaved, but I would kind of stare off into the distance because I actually wasn't focusing and, they would essentially just kind of pick on me more for questions to kind of get me to like answer more, but it actually just stressed me out and then I just didn't want to go to school and they would just repeat that each time. So that was hard on my mental health.

This led Sam to stop attending school, and then eventually to switch schools, and this process repeated. This became a cycle, where Sam would experience this at the new school as well, and then switch schools. Sam further explained feeling like she did not fit in at any of these schools, and that the school system was not designed in a way that allowed her to thrive, or to feel comfortable and safe. Sam further explained that her years of schooling did not align with her needs.

> It definitely made school feel like not a safe space. I also felt like I couldn't really trust my peers or my teachers. I had a few I've, I've gone to quite a few. I just realized I was trying to think of how many different schools I've been to. But there's a few of them where the counselors were just actually, like, not even helpful either, so it would be like that weird place where I'd be like, well, I'm not going to this school anymore.

Sam explained that these feelings reinforced the cycle of having to continuously change schools, and how difficult it was to never feel like it was the right fit.

> And that was really hard on me. So, then I switched schools again after a while. So, it was just like it just had that constant movement happening because they just couldn't find the right fit for my learning needs.

Sam then noted a few things that might have changed her experience, emphasizing the importance of sensory rooms and consistency between classrooms. Expressing how difficult change was, having different schedules in different classrooms, or surprises coming up was difficult. Having more consistency across classrooms could have been helpful.

> And like some classes now, they actually have little sensory corners and actual, real, sensory rooms. And I'm just like, wow, that's so amazing that they have that now.

Sam described what it felt like to have the school system, and her teachers, not provide her with the support she needed to succeed. She described wondering why she couldn't just fit within the system. The lack of support from the teachers and administration was devastating.

> I was quite devastated. I really felt like the school almost just didn't want me to succeed. That's how I felt. I know that wasn't fully true. But in my heart is just like, why can't, why can't this be something that I can kind of get more help with?

One option offered to Sam was to complete work in the English as a Second Language (ESL) room. However, Sam explained that she was apprehensive towards going to the ESL room because other students who used that room were teased, and she felt sectioned off.

> I felt a bit nervous going to the ESL rooms too, because, when you went in there, you would also get bullied really hard as well when coming out and certain high schools, it was horrendous, in elementary school it was usually okay.

Once again, Sam was not supported by the school she was in, and her needs and wants were not taken into account. Sam described feeling supported by a specific science teacher who listened to her needs, sat with her and took extra time to ensure she was comfortable in the classroom and understood the material. She also notes an art teacher who provided similar support. Sam explains that these two teachers were better able to understand her anxiety and

ADHD and were able make changes within the classroom to provide support, for example providing extensions or less homework, as well as emotional support.

> But he was one of the best teachers, he actually would sit during class or after class for a bit with whatever students needed the help and would explain it in a way that was just- I could understand. So that was really nice. And I also had a science teacher who had a lot of mental health awareness and stuff and she just brought humor into the classroom. And was just like a support for me and would check in on me through like, you know, school stuff.

This positive experience with a teacher was not common for Sam. She explained that for the most part, her experience in school was very deficit-based, explaining that her report cards never indicated the positives or the growth she was showing.

> Many schools would send me back with report cards listing no positives or strides to look forward to. No planning was strategically done with me to put me in a place for success and that has hit me hard. Many of the teachers didn't take the time to check in with me and sometimes would expect me to do it entirely on my own regardless of information they may have gotten about me.

Sam notes that had other teachers, or other adults at the school had mental health training, this could have been helpful and could have changed Sam’s experience. Sam ends her story by explaining how she completed her high school degree through online schooling and learning centers, and notes that these options worked well for her, providing opportunities for independent organization and tactile learning.

> But like they would have, kind of like prizes, you would win after hitting certain checkpoints and like, the exercises were really cool. Like, it'd be like actual workbooks

> with, like, you know, stuff kind of made to look cute. Like while you're doing it. Yeah, what really helped me figure out how to learn is that. That how to learn certain types of math and reading and all of that.

Sarah

Sarah identifies as a *28-year-old white woman with dyslexia*. Sarah begins by describing her educational story as a whole. She explains beginning in a Montessori school, then transitioning to private school, and then to public school. She then delves into the details of each experience. Sarah describes her experience in Montessori school as being a strength-based approach in which her teachers helped her develop where she was struggling and celebrated where she was succeeding.

> I think it was just a general sense of awareness that I had a learning disability. And the teachers that I had, they weren't like, “Sarah is really bad at English.” They were like, “Sarah is really good at art.” They focused on the positives and then they would help me with my English in a way that was catered to my learning style. It was a lot of focusing on what I was good at. And if I was less good at something, they would really try and help me do it. But they were never putting me down or anything.

Sarah also described her experience in Montessori school as being filled with choice and independence.

> You can kind of just wander around the classroom and pick which learning material you feel like using that day. And sometimes if the teacher notices that I'm only drawing most of the time, they'll be like, hey, Sarah, maybe do this math thing instead, which I didn't like, but she would sit with me and like, teach me how to do it like she

> noticed what kids were good at and what they weren't… So, like all my teachers could like, really teach each kid individually how they wanted to be taught.

The teachers in this school provided opportunities for the students to choose what they wanted to work on, and how they wanted to learn. Sarah explains that the teachers also took the time to work with students in small groups, for example bringing a group of 4 students with similar interests together.

> The way they do lessons in Montessori school is, or at least my one is, she'll kind of pick 5 or 6 students at a time and bring them over to her desk and she'll do a specialized lesson that's like half an hour long just for us.

Sarah then describes her experience in private school, explaining that it was a private school specifically for students with learning disabilities. Similarly to the Montessori school, the teachers here provided individualized and small-group instruction to students, taking the time and energy to ensure all students were understanding the material. Sarah notes that she recognized that this was due to the small class sizes, and resources available to teachers in this school, and understands that this is not possible in public schools, or other school settings with larger class sizes.

> They would do the lesson at the beginning and then they would sort of walk around to each student while we were working on our project for that day and sit with us and see if we were struggling or not. So, they had the time and mental capacity to help each student because the class sizes were so small.

In both Montessori and Private school, Sarah emphasizes the strengths-based approaches her teachers took. They focused on her strengths, allowing her to grow her self-esteem, while also helping her in areas where she struggled. Sarah mentions she never felt like her teachers put her down, rather they took the time to sit with her, and spent time ensuring she understood the material.

Moving into high school was a stark difference from her earlier experiences, however Sarah notes that because she was older (in ninth grade), she expected this difference and was prepared for it. With the bigger class sizes, there was less one-on-one or small group instruction with teachers, and less opportunity for choice and independence in the classroom. Sarah explains the support she had from her mom during this time. She notes that her and her mom were aware of how she learned best, and knew that in the public system they would not have the same supports and resources as at Montessori school or private school.

> By the time I was at a public school in high school I already knew that I had to learn differently, and my mom knew. So like, we kind of went into it knowing that we would have to find our own way around.

She also describes how her mom helped her with various academic tasks during this time.

> The other thing my mom would do, which was massive, whenever I had to read a book for class she would get the audio tape for me from the library so I could listen to the book rather than read it. She knew I would take in the story better this way. And also, she knew if I had to read the book myself, it would have taken me over twice as long to finish as everyone else. She would also just read to me if there was no audio tape for it.

In explaining the difference between applied and academic courses, Sarah noted that the teachers in the applied classes did try to create those opportunities for individualized instruction, while in the academic classes it was more focused on lecturing and note taking. The applied classes sometimes resembled Sarah's experience in Montessori and Private school more so than the academic classes.

> The teachers in those classes taught you more carefully because, which was what I needed. So, they taught you more carefully and they like paid more attention to each student,

Sarah finishes her story by sharing some of the social differences between these schools, noting that this aspect was also a large shift when moving to public school. Sarah discussed feeling in a bubble in her private school, being surrounded by the same small group of people, and when she moved to public school, the pool of people and experiences got a lot larger. Through this transition, Sarah described feeling out of place because she had been in the bubble of her private school for so long.

> Why am I so different from everyone else? Yeah, I realized that my life was different when one of my friends started to go to public school, and I was still in private school because she started to- You just don't have outside, umm, factors, I don't know, like there's not like. I wasn't around Grade 8- like I was around Grade 8 students, but they were also just in my position. I wasn't around people. I wasn't around a wide range of people.

Michael

Michael identifies as a *20-year-old white male with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy.* Michael begins his story by describing the experience of having to switch schools in middle school as the middle school attached to his elementary school, where all of his friends were going, was physically inaccessible. Michael explained that he was informed that this change was occurring due to the inaccessibility of the middle school attached to his elementary school. He notes that he was young, and at the time did not fully understand, but now, reflecting on this experience, notes that it was the first time he was exposed to systemic ableism. Starting over at a new middle school was difficult and lonely for Michael. He notes that the school was full of cliques, and that many people had already been friends for years and were not welcoming.

> I think it started in middle school because I have a physical disability and I went to an Elementary school that wasn't in the district I lived in and the middle school that connected to that elementary school was not accessible, was not actually accessible. So I had to go to a different middle school which is very difficult for me because I made, I had no friends in middle school, very difficult and that's -that's like one aspect that I really did feel that was unique to me specifically.

Michael shared how lonely it was in middle and high school, and how difficult it was to enter a new school where other students had known each other for years.

> I mean, it was difficult. I was really lonely in middle school and I wanted to- Everyone was friends and middle school was still friends in high school. So, it's really difficult to make friends.

Specifically explaining one experience with a physical education teacher who did not understand or support Michaels needs, despite other teachers and Michael's parents speaking with the teacher. Michael explained that this was a difficult and disturbing experience. Michael then described his high school experience noting that although it was physically accessible with automatic doors and an elevator. There were parts of this accessibility that led to a loss of independence. For example, Michael explained he could not operate the elevator alone.

> The high school I went to, it was a multi floor and I had like an elevator. It was more like a lift that I couldn't operate by myself. So that made me lose a lot of independence in high school. Um, it was very difficult to deal with, I felt.

Michael also described his experience with the COVID-19 pandemic through high school. He explained that had to stay home for three months as he is immunocompromised. This time was extremely isolating and lonely for Michael. Michaels school attempted some strategies to make school more accessible, however they felt last minute and poorly thought out.

> I'm immunocompromised, and obviously at that point, there's like no more masking. None of that. So, I did not go to school for like 3 months. And it was very difficult for me. And I feel like they didn't really try to make any adaptations that really suited me. Like- like what they told me to do wasn't helpful, it didn't help me learn. I don't know. Over that period of time, I found school wasn't made super accessible.

This led to a lack of a sense of belonging and feeling under-appreciated. Michael did not feel supported by his school and felt hopeless. Michael does mention one class in which he felt welcomed and felt a sense of belonging, his theatre class. Michael explained that this class was a mix of different grade levels, and there were no cliques. He explains that this class was more laid back and there was a sense of community that he did not have in his other classes.

> The only reason I did make friends was because I joined theater class, which was a mix of all grades, not just one grade. So it was easier. It felt more welcoming. It was a lot easier to make friends that way.

Michael explained how these experiences and these feelings have contributed to where he is today, noting lessened self-confidence and how difficult it is to form strong interpersonal relationships.

> I think the lack of feeling of belonging definitely made me lose confidence and like how I present myself. I think it's made it harder for me to, I struggle, it's been harder for me to make strong interpersonal relationships.

Reflecting on these experiences, Michael explains that he can understand how the systemic ableism present in schools and in our culture shaped his experiences. Michael ends his story by pointing out how much needs to change, and how difficult it is for those changes to occur, but how important it is.

> The way systemic ableism sort of permeates throughout every single facet of society and how it feels when architecture is hostile to your own existence. I better understood that these systems exist and need to be eliminated from society. But since it's systemic, it takes very- very. It's very difficult to do.

John

John identifies as a *28-year-old Caucasian male with ADHD and Dyslexia*. John begins his story by explaining how he attended several different elementary and high schools, and notes that they all did things differently and overall, the support he received was not helpful.

> I bounced around. I did. I went to two elementary schools, and I went to three different high schools and each school kind of did it differently depending on the school that I was at… I guess if I were to sum up my whole story. The special the, the aid that I got wasn't very helpful, if that makes sense.

John also explains that even within schools, he had to reach out to several different services and groups for support, and this made getting support more difficult. John explains that in elementary school being sent to a separate space to learn felt isolating and felt like it was a punishment.

> I remember having a hard time being organized and then I remember it being a big effort to ask for help. And then I would, I would just get so frustrated with the process of going from the front desk to the learning centre to somewhere else and they would- I just felt

> like I would be sent in full circle, often. So, then I'd just be like, oh wait, I don't even care. Like I just, I'm. This is. It's embarrassing to ask for help. And then I'm just asking and no one's helping anyway. So, I would just be like, OK, what's the point, you know?

In the learning centre, it was just a space to do extra homework, John did not receive supports and this contributed to it feeling like a punishment, or like he was being sent to a time-out as he was separated from his friends and missed out on different classes.

> I remember high school, you don't really know, I feel like you're just sent to the Special Ed class and you don't know why you're getting sent there. But you just, It's just like another place to go. I would say the downside to that is you do kind of feel isolated. In the sense where like, yeah, OK, you're getting help, but it's viewed as negative because you're separated from your friends.

Going to a different room than his friends was his first indication that he learned differently.

> Yeah, it’s just like I want to be with my, like, lunch ends, and you want to be with your friends, and you got to go somewhere your friends aren't. Yeah. So, I would say that that was like the first indication of like, oh, I learned different. Like I gotta go, I gotta go to this special room.

John also notes the school using a merit system where they would reward students with stickers, and he remembers never receiving a sticker, and how this impacted his experience and feeling a lack of a sense of belonging in the school and isolated from his peers.

> So it's like fuck I'm dumb or like you, you just think everyone else is getting stuff and you're not getting stuff, and you don't really why you’re not getting stuff. I don't remember too much of getting help.

In high school, John explains a similar experience being isolated from friends and pulled out of the classroom and brought to the special education room. John also describes how the supports that were given were not always helpful. For example, when retaking a test, the maximum mark he could receive was a 60%, a passing grade. So, even though this was meant to be a support, it felt like a punishment.

> I also found in high school, more often than not the policy was if, if you retake the max, the max you can get is a 60. So it's not very- there's not much incentive as a student to be like, OK, well, I'm going to try again, but it doesn't matter how hard I try. It's like. Like I'm still getting penalised.

John also described how teachers would treat this class differently and although it was unintentional it furthered the feelings of a lack of belonging and the lack of support from the school.

> I think once you get kind of put like you, you come into high school and Grade 7 and everyone's kind of like young and innocent and then you get split up into the classes. And then I find, like, teachers don't mean to do it, but they treat you differently.

John shared that the school did not take the time to understand why he was struggling or misbehaving.

> I think I like, maybe fell through the cracks where it's like, 'oh, he…' I don't know. Yeah, I don't. I just don't remember being like someone being like, 'hey, it's fine'... 'This isn't - what you feel is normal. You're not the first person to feel this, and there's a way to deal with it'. It was more like you're misbehaving. This is not how, this is, this is not how kids are supposed to behave. Stop behaving this way.

Throughout high school, John highlighted one teacher who pushed him and did not give up on him. He expressed that this teacher helped him develop his self-confidence. John described the importance of having a teacher who believed in him in high school, when not all of his teachers provided this support.

> She didn't- she just kept freaking pushing me, pushing me, pushing me, pushing me, pushing me. And I didn't. In high school. I hated her like she was my biggest enemy. But now as an adult, I really, really appreciate what she did for me.

In describing her teaching style, John explains that she was tough, but that she made an impact.

> She was pretty tough. She was pretty tough. She had, like, her style is pretty tough, but she would always just be like. One thing I really liked is that she would command our attention. So, like at the beginning of class, she would always be, 'I am the centre of your universe'. And it was silly. But it's something you would always just repeat in your head because you knew it was coming at the beginning of class… Yeah, she just inspired confidence more than anything

John then explained his experience in doing Grade 12 at a different high school. This school had a specialized program for student athletes and had an academic advisor for all student athletes. The advisor supported students with the logistics of getting supports such as rescheduling a test or finding a tutor, and John explained that this was especially helpful.

> It was just like I felt like instead of having to deal with the clerical, which is the hard part for me, that was kind of the hard part is asking for it and then setting up the appointment and doing all that stuff.

Reflecting on these experiences, John explained that he had to develop resilience and learn how to carve his own path a lot earlier than many of his peers.

> Well, I would say resilient. I remember feeling, so I remember, OK. I remember having a lot of conversations with my friends after university and like they've gone, they've gone through, did high school. They cruised through high school. They cruised through CEGEP. They had a phenomenal experience in university and then now there's no more schooling. And then they get this, like, wave of anxiety of like, OK, what am I going to do with my life? Like what is? I've been told what to do, blah, blah, blah, blah blah. Like. Like now I'm forced to find- like navigate my way with, with no, no structure of school. And find your place. I remember feeling like that in maybe grade 7 or 8.

John also had to develop resilience much earlier than his peers due to his experiences throughout his K-12 educational journey.

> I think because of how hard school was for me. It forced me to kind of adapt earlier than maybe most. And then you do get resilient. And then I find because I've- maybe was feeling that earlier than, than like my- maybe like 10 years earlier than my friends. OK, as soon as school was done I'm not really afraid to try new things or I'm not afraid to fail because I've been failing my whole life, and like nothing happens like you just fail. OK. I guess the positive thing is that you're not afraid because you have nothing to lose.

Emma

Emma identifies as a *21-year-old Asian female with Dyslexia*. Emma begins her story by explaining that her first language is Mandarin, and for a long-time people assumed that her difficulties in school were as a result of English being her second language. Emma describes that she was eventually diagnosed with dyslexia in grade 6.

> Because I was so little, I didn't quite have the phonics fully solidified of Mandarin so it was kind of easier for me to transition. And growing up, I guess, people didn't really realise that I wasn't fully able to read or write in English till about Grade 6… It wasn't until some testing came back for grade 6 like EQAO stuff. That I uh, that it was discovered that I had dyslexia. And then from there, my parents kind of put me into special programs.

Emma explains knowing that she was struggling at a young age but not understanding why.

> I think growing up I didn't quite realise it at the time. I just knew that I was really struggling and I couldn't figure out why.

In elementary school, Emma notes that at first being taken out of class felt fun and special. However, she then began to feel isolated from her friends because she was not learning the same things as them, she felt like she did not have a sense of belonging in the school.

> When I was younger, I thought it was so cool that I got to be taken out and be like this special group of like, be like, 'hah, I get to miss class'. But as I got older it kind of sucked because I kind of realised what was happening. I was like I was very much like 'oh, how come all of my classmates get to do this and they don't have to do this'. I want to be learning what they're learning.

She also notes that as a result of being taken out of class, she fell behind in the subjects that she missed as well. Reflecting on her experiences in special education in elementary school, Emma described that it was not helpful or supportive.

> Looking back, I kind of feel like sometimes I maybe missed things that I really would have liked to stay for instead. Because honestly looking back I didn't think it was that helpful for me. Like the spec Ed for the elementary one.

Emma then explained the transition to high school, and to an extra-curricular tutoring centre that was primarily for students with learning disabilities. This learning centre took place after school hours. Emma explained that although at the time she did not enjoy going, that she tried to make the most of it and reflecting on her experience in that centre, found it to be one of the more helpful supports that she experienced.

> The scholars and stuff, the after-school program, I thought that that one, that was the one that was really transformative for me in terms of my ability to be able to read and write and, you know, do basic English human interaction.

However, Emma explained that her experience within her high school was more difficult both with academics and with peers. Emma also explained that in the early high school years, she felt a disconnect from her peers and a lack of a sense of belonging. Emma also shared that this disconnect extended beyond academics and into her social relationships within school. She explains that because reading was difficult, she was not aware of current books and pop culture that her peers were.

> But at the same time, it's just like people didn't quite realise that I was struggling, which is why I needed this stuff. So, kids would ask a lot of questions about it. And stuff that I couldn't really answer at the time because I didn't even know. So, it kind of created a bit of a divide between me and my classmates. Maybe it wasn't there, but me personally looking back, I kind of felt it was like singling me out or stuff like that where it's just like, oh, I just wanted to blend in at the time with my peers.

Emma’s high school experience also involved a significant amount of self-advocacy from a young age. For example, having to report to the principal when teachers refused to provide accommodations and follow Emma's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

> So, the issue that I would run into a lot of the time is teachers aren't willing to do this, even though it is a legally binding documentation, they're sometimes like, ‘well, it's not for this class or it's not for, no’. They would just flat out say no so. Even though it is a legally binding document.

Emma also had to explain to her teachers the reasons behind her IEP, that it was not providing her an unfair advantage, rather it was allowing her to learn in a way that worked best for her and a way that allowed her to be at the same level as her classmates.

> You have to do a lot of advocating for yourself because the school system or just, or teachers who are ignorant to what is going on and they don't realise it's as it's used as like a tool for you, they kind of see it as like, oh, it's kind of your cheating type of thing. But in reality it just puts me on the same playing field as everyone else, whereas like everyone else was like 6 steps in front of me without this stuff.

Although these experiences taught Emma valuable skills that she has taken with her through her educational journey, Emma explained that she had to develop these skills a lot younger than many of her peers, and during a time where there should have been more support from the teachers around her.

> I feel like maybe a Grade 7 shouldn't have to go through that. Maybe they can start teaching this type of thing around grade 11, halfway through grade 10 and up, but I just don't think it's something like a, like an 11-year-old should have to go through.

Chapter Summary

Participant narratives begin with participants' self-described demographic information and include direct quotes from interview transcripts. The summaries also include notes from member checks to ensure that participants' lived experiences were honoured. Participants explained their experiences across their educational journeys, and what those experiences felt like and meant to them in the moment. Participants also began to examine how these experiences are impacting them in the present. In writing and analysing these narratives, I developed themes that were common across participant stories.

CHAPTER FIVE: Themes

In following Crossley's (2007) six analytic steps of narrative analysis, five themes were developed when exploring the narratives shared by participants: (1) Lack of a sense of belonging, (2) Learning life lessons earlier than peers, (3) Support systems, (4) Impact of Special Education Services, and (5) Times of transition. Developing themes is an active process in which I, as the researcher, am not a neutral being, I developed these themes in conversation with people's stories, and in conversation with my own (Braun et al., 2022). Themes were common across participants, the idea was brought up in each individual's story, however, these themes were explored in different ways across participants. Each theme has a central idea, but appears in different ways across participants, which is how subthemes were developed. The broader theme is representative of a common experience across participants, while the subthemes are the ways in which that experience was presented by each participant.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Research Question	Theme	Sub-themes
What are the lived-experiences of individuals with disabilities in special education through K-12?	1. Lack of a sense of belonging.	Not fitting in. Feeling unwanted in school.
	2. Learning life lessons earlier than peers.	Resilience. Advocacy skills.
What are success stories of inclusion in K-12 special education?	1. Support systems.	Familial support Instrumental teachers. Logistical support.
What are the stories of challenges in K-12 special education?	1. Impact of Special Education Services.	Support Received. Loneliness. Isolation.
	2. Times of Transition.	Between different schools. Between levels of school.

Lack of a Sense of Belonging.

All five participants expressed feeling a lack of belonging at some point or throughout their K-12 experiences. Although this theme emerged in different ways across participants, it was evident that it was a common experience. All participants shared feeling like they did not fit in at school or with their peers. Three participants shared that they did not feel welcomed or appreciated at school.

Not Fitting in.

Five participants identified not fitting in as a significant part of their K-12 experience in special education. For Sarah, this feeling was most prevalent in social situations, noting that she “Never knew, like on the weekends, what to wear, because I wasn't around like- the kids that I was around, we were in a bubble.” Emma also noted that she did not feel like she fit in socially with her peers, “They're always talking about, like, you know, books and like, cool stuff like that. And then it's like, I couldn't relate to it because I didn't really read much, I would always avoid it because I was scared of it." For Sarah and Emma, the feeling of not fitting in at school was predominantly social. Both participants noted the difficulty of feeling like they did not fit in with their peers and how this impacted their educational experience. Emma also expressed questioning her separation from her peers,

> As I got older it kind of sucked because I kind of realised what was happening. I was like I was very much like 'oh, how come all of my classmates get to do this and they don't have to do this.' I want to be learning what they're learning.

Similarly, Sam expressed how it felt to have differing experiences from her peers, "I was also feeling quite angry that I couldn't like, you know, navigate things so easily, like, as some of my peers." Another participant, John, expressed the feeling of not fitting in in the classroom, "I do remember they would give systems of merit. Like if you do well on stuff you get like a sticker. And then I remember just not having any stickers." Michael noted that he also struggled to feel like he fit in with his peers, "The middle school and high school I went to were extremely cliquey, so like most of the people that were friends were friends since 1st Grade elementary school. And it was very hard to connect with these people." Five participants expressed feelings of not fitting in with their peers, with some of these feelings deriving from social situations, and others from academic situations.

Feeling Unwanted in School.

In discussing the sense of a lack of belonging in their K-12 experiences, four participants also noted not feeling welcomed or appreciated in their schools or classrooms. There is a lack of preparedness and willingness to prepare for possible accommodations that students might need. For example, Sam shared her feelings of not being appreciated or encouraged by her school,

> I was like, quite devastated. I- I really felt like, like the school almost like just didn't want me to succeed. Like, that's like how I felt like. I know that wasn't, like, fully true. But like in my heart is just like, why can't, like, why can't this be something that I can kind of like get more help with

Similarly, Michael noted that the distance education he received during the COVID-19 pandemic was “not really adapted very well, just sort of put together very quickly.” Michael shared that his experience might have been different had the school had more “foresight, or preparedness into thinking what it could be.” John had a similar experience with his school not being adapted to his needs.

> At the time I was in school, the software wasn't there yet, but just being able to have the software at the end of it like end of high school started getting good where like the computer could read to me. Could do a bunch of stuff, like a bunch of stuff. So, I'm dyslexic and I have ADHD. So, like the combination is- can be gnarly sometimes and the the schools that I went to weren't- hadn't really adapted.

John also explained how his teachers contributed to the feelings of being undervalued in school,

> I think once you get kind of put like you, you come into high school and Grade 7 and everyone's kind of like young and innocent and then you get split up into the classes. And then I find, like, teachers don't mean to do it, but they treat you differently.

The lack of preparation to accommodate within schools led participants to feel unwelcome and unsupported by the school system. For example, Emma noted that her school suggested that she was not able to attend university,

> I think at the time I was really like, I was really worried that, like, you know, maybe the school system was right saying I wasn't able to go into university when I should have just gone into the applied stream.

Although four participants noted that they understand the financial limits as well as lack of resources within the public school system, the feelings of being unwelcome and undervalued remain.

Learning Life Lessons Earlier than Peers.

Three participants also expressed having to learn important life-skills significantly earlier than their peers.

Resilience.

When sharing the lessons that they had to learn much earlier than their peers, resilience was an important lesson in participants' K-12 experience. Two participants expressed having to build resilience early on in elementary school. John explained this learning process in terms of not being afraid of failure.

> And then you do get resilient. And then I find because I've- maybe was feeling that earlier than, than like my- maybe like 10 years earlier than my friends. OK, as soon as school was done, I'm not really afraid to try new things or I'm not afraid to fail because I've been failing my whole life, and like nothing happens like you just fail. OK. Like so I guess the positive thing is, is that you're not afraid because you have nothing to lose.

Michael explains his first experience with systemic ableism, he then reflects on this experience and how he has had to move through his educational journey with this knowledge,

> The way systemic ableism sort of permeates throughout every single facet of society and how it feels when architecture is hostile to your own existence. I better understood that

> these systems exist and need to be eliminated from society. But since it's systemic, it takes very- very. It's very difficult to do.

Advocacy Skills.

One participant also expressed having to learn self-advocacy skills very early on in the educational journeys. Emma explained that she had to advocate for the accommodations they were afforded through her Individual Education Plan. She noted that while these were valuable skills to learn, she had to learn them too young. For example, Emma explained her experience with teachers who refused to follow her IEP.

> It was definitely really hard dealing with teachers like that. And then I would have to, like, go above them to the principal or VP and then they would usually like, figure it out, and then they would, like, tell the teacher to be like, no, legally, you can't do that. But it was just so unnecessary for something that, like, didn't need to be a thing.

Support Systems.

Familial Support.

Three participants expressed the familial support that they had. These participants all described the support they received from their parents. Sarah explained receiving support from her mom in completing academic tasks; “And then the other thing my mom was like, massive, whenever I had to read a book for class that wasn't Shakespeare she would get, like, the audio tape for me.” John described the support he received from his parents in maintaining his confidence in other areas of his life; “I'm lucky that I had sports to keep me like, Um, keep my confidence like that's where I get my confidence and stuff. My parents are really good about that. So, I didn't ever, I didn't ever pay too much mind.” Emma described the support she received from her parents when they disagreed and pushed for a different academic path than the one her school was suggesting; “I think looking back, I'm really glad my parents did, like, intervene and like say something because I would be in a very different spot than I am now.” Although these supports looked slightly different and focused on different aspects of participants' lives, these three participants all expressed that they would not be where they are today without that familial support.

Instrumental Teachers.

Three participants expressed having an instrumental teacher who provided them with support in different ways. Sam explained that she had a science teacher who took extra time to sit with her and explain concepts in a way that worked for her learning style; “he was one of the best teachers, he actually like would sit with like during class or like after class for a bit to like with like whatever students needed the help and would like explain it in a way that like was just I could understand.” Sam also described receiving emotional support from an art teacher.

> I also had a science teacher who was like- had a lot of mental health awareness and stuff and she just brought humor into the classroom. And was just like a support for me and would check in on me like through like, you know, school stuff.

Sarah also describes an instrumental teacher in her schooling who would help students participate in experiential and tactile learning by bringing them to a local marsh.

> Our assignments from that class were like, draw a picture of one animal you saw today and like, write everything you know about it basically, like write it like a journal entry about that animal and like what you learned about it. And so that was like huge also because it was hands-on learning.

The academic and emotional support provided by these teachers had a significant impact on the educational experiences of participants. For example, John described having a teacher that did not give up on him, and kept pushing him to do better; "I had this one teacher named [teacher name]. Who, just like, would not give up on me. Like she just- and I would resist… she just she didn't- she just kept freaking pushing me, pushing me, pushing me, pushing me, pushing me."

Logistical Support.

Two participants described the logistical support that they had in high school that was a significant support. Both participants had an academic counsellor facilitate scheduling. For example, John had an academic advisor specific to student athletes as well as online supports during his final year of high school;

> Let's say like you forget your homework or like you weren't there that day, they post it online, you can go online and get the PDF. Do it. It's just like super simple stuff that like OK yeah, I forgot this or I forget that, not a problem. There's another copy on your computer.

Sarah also explained having support from a guidance counselor in finding the right English teacher to help her finish Grade 11 English; "I worked with my guidance counselor because she was like, hey, you're only going to pass this course if you have this one specific teacher so. He was the best teacher in the school… And he really understood, like, alternative learning and stuff." These logistical supports were significant supports for John and Sarah in the later years of high school.

Impact of Special Education Services.

All five participants expressed that being removed from class and brought to a separate Special Education room was not helpful or supportive throughout their K-12 education. This experience emerged in different ways across participants.

Support Received.

Three participants described their experience in Special Education in terms of the support they did or did not receive. Sarah described her experience in the Special Education room as it being just another room to put her in, with no extra guidance or support, “It was like to do homework. I think I mostly did- Like sometimes I would just talk to my friend. Yeah. So that was less useful. I don't think- I don't think it really helped anybody.” Similarly, Sam described going to the English as a Second Language (ESL) room, and there being a lack of support, or the room being closed, “And they did have like the ESL rooms which I went to on occasion, but I remember sometimes they didn't have like enough people or something like that or it wouldn't be open just because there wasn't enough people there.” The lack of support that Sarah and Sam received in the Special Education and ESL rooms resulted in these options not being helpful. Similarly, Emma shared that the Special Education classroom she was brought to did not feel helpful, and even contributed to her falling behind in other courses; “honestly looking back I didn't think it was that helpful for me. Like the spec Ed for the elementary one.”

Isolation

Two participants expressed feeling isolated throughout their K-12 education. This isolation emerged in different ways across participants. John explained viewing the Special Education classroom as something negative because it was not clear why he was being sent there. He explained how this experience isolated him from his friends, and because of this, being sent to a different room felt like a punishment rather than a support.

> I feel like you're just, like, sent to the Special Ed class and you don't know why you're getting sent there. But you just. It's just like another place to go. I would say the

> downside to that is you do kind of feel isolated. In the sense where like, yeah, OK, you're getting help, but it's like viewed as negative because you're separated from your friends.

Michael explained his feelings of social isolation throughout his K-12 educational experience;

> Ah, I mean, it was difficult. I was really lonely, and in middle school and I wanted to- Everyone was friends and middle school was still friends in high school. So, it's really difficult to make friends.

Times of Transition.

Three participants expressed how challenging times of transitions were. Participants discussed the challenges of transitioning between different schools, adapting to new environments.

Different Schools.

Three participants expressed this challenge in moving between different schools. Sam explained the challenge of feeling like the school she was at was not the right fit, and then changing schools, and this experience becoming a cycle,

> So I would like start going home by myself and then just walk to my room like I'm going to switch schools and then it would be like the same thing. And I would repeat and like, I just found myself constantly changing and I think I'd likely probably also developed a bit of a phobia from school too, so it just like it would I associate a lot of unpleasant things and it's like the slightest thing I was like I just like can't go.

Similarly, John explained moving between different schools several times, and noted that things were done differently at the different schools he attended.

> I guess that it it wasn't necessarily straightforward. Um, I bounced around. I did. I went to two elementary schools, and I went to three different high schools and each school kind of did it differently depending on the school that I was at.

Switching between different schools was a challenge in that it meant adjusting to new ways of doing things, new people, and new environments. For example, Michael describes how difficult adapting to a new school was,

> I don't remember exactly how I felt, but I think it was very new for me all this- sudden change and it was hard for me to adapt. I think I don't know. It's kind of. And I was like 10 years old, I don't exactly know how I felt.

Chapter Summary.

I created five major themes in following Crossley's (2007) six steps of narrative analysis: (1) Lack of a sense of belonging, (2) Learning life lessons earlier than peers, (3) Support systems, (4) Impact of Special Education Services, and (5) Times of transition. In examining a lack of a sense of belonging, participants expressed that not fitting in, and feeling unwanted in school where two significant aspects or this experience. Participants also noted needing to learn to be resilient, and to self-advocate much earlier than their peers. When explaining stories of success, participants explained three significant support systems: familial support, instrumental teachers, and logistical support. The impact of special education services was discussed by participants in terms of the support that was or was not received, as well as feelings of isolation. Participants also described the experience of needing to transition between different schools. These themes were found across participants.

CHAPTER SIX: Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The purpose of my thesis was to retroactively explore the lived-experiences of students with disabilities across their K-12 education to address the following research questions: (a) What are the lived-experiences of individuals with disabilities in special education through K-12? (b) What are success stories in K-12 special education? And (c) What are the stories of challenges in K-12 special education? The five individuals that I interviewed had experience in special education in their K-12 journeys, and identified as having a disability. In hearing the stories of these five people, five major themes emerged: (1) Lack of a sense of belonging, (2) Learning life lessons earlier than peers, (3) Support systems, (4) Impact of Special Education Services, and (5) Times of transition. These five themes will be further explored in the context of the experiences of disabled students in educational environments.

Sense of Belonging

Although each participant has their own unique story, their experiences of sense of belonging in school and in the classroom were similar. Sense of belonging was impacted by social relationships with peers and teachers, and feeling valued by their school. Vaccaro and colleagues (2015) explained similar findings, noting that sense of belonging for students with disabilities in university is impacted by self-advocacy, mastery of the student role, and social relationships. The authors also noted that these factors are enhanced when a student has an increased sense of belonging. The importance of social relationships at the K-12 level was highlighted by the lived experiences of participants in this study. Participants explained feeling othered, both socially and academically, in their experiences in special education from K-12. Particularly in being removed from their classrooms and their peers, and taken to different spaces to learn. Sense of belonging is commonly examined from either external (physical environment) or internal (social, emotional, cultural environment) lenses (Edgar et al., 2024; Mahar et al., 2013; Raines et al., 2023; Vaccaro et al., 2015). The findings from my thesis research demonstrate a need to further examine the relationship between internal and external lenses. Participants expressed that the external learning environment impacted their social relationships with peers and teachers, and how that in turn impacted their sense of belonging at school. Participants also described feeling undervalued and unwanted by their schools, and how this impacted their sense of belonging. Participants also expressed the challenges that they experienced with inclusion in the classroom and in the broader school system. Participants in the current study explained feeling like they did not fit in with their peers.

Learning Life Lessons Early

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy skills are often explored from the lens of being something to promote, or develop for disabled students. Hart and colleagues (2013) proposed a model for teaching self-advocacy skills relating to Individualized Education Plan (IEP) implementation to elementary school-aged children. This model was proposed with the intention of bolstering students with disabilities with the communication and google setting-tools, and knowledge needed to advocate for themselves to ensure they received the proper accommodations needed in order to succeed. While the intention and goal of ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed is clearly a positive one, the emotional and social impact may not be. Participants in the current study expressed that they needed to learn these skills and tools significantly earlier than their peers, and at times this was isolating. Reflecting on their stories, participants could see that the tools they developed were useful in their current lives, however learning them at such a young age, with minimal support, was difficult. Perhaps rather than putting the burden entirely on disabled students in elementary school to advocate for themselves in a system that does not support or celebrate them, the system itself needs to shift. Much of the literature focuses on developing self-advocacy skills, and not the experience of needing to develop those skills early on. This experience was brought forward by the participants in the current study, and should be explored further in future research. For example, Woolf and Bie (2022) explored the experiences of self-advocacy for disabled university students, and found that it is commonly a deficit-based, ableist experience. It is crucial to continue to explore the experiences of students with disabilities in relation to self-advocacy, both at the post-secondary and K-12 levels. In

This is not to say that self-advocacy skills are not important to develop and foster. Participants in the current study expressed that although needing to develop these skills at a much younger age than their non-disabled peers, these skills have benefited them in their adult lives. Perhaps an awareness of difference at a young age leads to this early need for self-advocacy skills. This early development of these life skills is common when exploring the stories of students with disability (McNulty, 2003; Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou's, 2009). It is important to prioritize the lived experiences of students with disabilities moving forward, as it will lead to an increased understanding of the impact that developing these skills at a young age can have, both positive and negative.

Support Systems

In hearing the success stories of disabled students, support systems are often discussed. For post-secondary students with disabilities, families and friends are named as some of the most important sources of support (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Bromley et al., 2021). Participants in this study also expressed the importance of familial support in their K-12 education. Participants expressed how their families were strong advocates for their educational experience and their wellbeing at a young age. Not much work exists in the way of disabled students' lived experiences with this support. There is, however, work done on how to best support teachers and families of individuals with disabilities. For the five participants in this study, teachers and family played an important role in their educational experiences.

Impact of Special Education Services

The special education services that participants discussed receiving included being removed from the general classroom to receive additional support, extra time on assignments, and having additional support within the classroom. While all participants' experiences with these services were personal and individual, there were some commonalities, including feelings of isolation. This finding is supported by previous research that emphasized the experiences and voices of disabled students (Little et al., 2022; Tews & Lupart, 2008). Participants also noted that the services they received were not always consistent, for example, some teachers refusing to provide accommodations. Previous work done alongside students with disabilities has shown that inconsistent accommodations can have significant impacts on students’ education experiences (Holloway, 2001: Vickerman & Blundell, 2011). These findings highlight the importance of student voice in research, and in practice.

Times of Transition

Times of transition were identified as being a challenge for the participants in the current study. Transitions between levels of schooling and between different institutions were explained as difficult periods of time. Transition periods for disabled students moving from high-school to post-secondary are commonly explored in terms of supports available and transition programs or models (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; McCall, 2015; Schutz, 2002). There is little work exploring the experience of transitioning from one school to a different school. The participants in the current study explained that there were multiple instances where they had to change institutions as a result of not having their support needs met. However, there were no transition plans or strategies implemented during these changes. When exploring the transition from high-school to post-secondary, students with disabilities often experience shifting supports, difficult social situations and a need for self-advocacy skills (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; McCall, 2015; Schutz, 2002). In exploring the experiences of disabled students transitioning from elementary to high school, relationships with teachers and peers, and navigating physical spaces have been seen to be impactful of the transition experiences of disabled students (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Pitt et al., 2021). Participants in this study also discussed social relationships as playing an important role in their experiences of transition between schools.

Retrospective Approach

Retrospective research approaches allow for connections to be drawn between and across life events (Ritchie, 2003 as cited in Roulstone, 2010). In asking people to reflect on past experiences, individuals may identify impactful events, and meaning can be drawn between these events (Rosenthal, 2004). Narrative retrospective reflection allows people to see events as a part of a larger whole (Freeman, 2015). Two common criticisms of retrospective approaches include the accuracy of recalled past events, and the idea that past events and experiences may be reconstructed, consciously or unconsciously (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). In this thesis, participants reflected on their experience in K-12 special education, which was between 10 and 20 years ago depending on the person. As noted in the common criticisms of a retrospective approach, this time period may lead to questions about the accuracy and interpretation of recalled events. While memories may not always be “accurate”, the goal of a retrospective narrative design is not factual accuracy, rather, it is to better understand individuals lived experiences, and the meaning ascribed to those experiences (Freeman, 2015; Rosenthal, 2004). A retrospective approach embraces reflection and meaning making as a way of understanding lived experience in a way that other qualitative inquiries do not (Freeman, 2015). The participants in this thesis reflected on their experiences as a way to understand the meaning of their experiences, and a way to create connections.

Limitations

This study does have several limitations, namely the sample size and the generalizability of the findings. The findings of this study reflect the lived-experiences of five adults who self-identified as having a disability and who had experience in special education through Kindergarten to grade 12. Each individual has their own unique story to tell, and while these stories share common themes, this is not to say that these findings or themes can be generalized to all adults who self-identify as having a disability and who have experience in special education. Although representativeness is not necessarily the goal in using a narrative approach, the representativeness of the data is impacted as a result of the small sample size (Crossley, 2007). The data collected and analyzed and the conclusions made are also impacted by the researcher (Crossley, 2007). Although having the same disability does not equate to having the same lived experiences, it is also important to note that not all participants had the same disability.

Implications for Research and Practice

Implications for Research

Much of the research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in K-12 is driven by parents, teachers and school administrators. Although these perspectives are important, and provide valuable information, it is also vital to prioritize the voices and the stories of disabled students themselves, the people living these experiences. In focusing only on the perspectives of parents, teachers and school administrators, the stories of disabled students are undervalued. Hearing the stories of students with disabilities allows educators to ensure that learning environments reflect their lived experiences. Future research should aim to centre the voices of students with disabilities, and understand those voices as the experts on their experience. This research should continue to be done using interview style and narrative approaches. A narrative or qualitative approach can provide insights and space for nuance that other, perhaps more quantitative, approaches cannot. By bringing qualitative, narrative approaches into Special Education research, student voices can be valued in the way that parent, educator, and administrator voices currently are. Braun and colleagues (2022) highlight the impact that many small-scale, interview-based studies can have by contributing to a larger body of knowledge. All of this work is in conversation with each other, each story adds to this conversation to weave a larger narrative.

Future research should also aim to include younger students in this type of research to gain an understanding of the K-12 experience as it is happening. Including students in the research process not only in retrospective stories, but also in current experiences in Special Education can provide insights into how Special Education policy and practice is being experienced by disabled students in real-time. Including disabled students in the research, and prioritizing their voices through narrative and qualitative approaches can ensure that educational spaces are designed in inclusive and student-driven ways.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this thesis demonstrate the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for all students, particularly for students with disabilities. Each of the five people who shared their stories expressed feelings of isolation, feeling like they did not fit in, and feeling unwanted at school. These stories highlight the importance of actively valuing students with disabilities in the classroom, and ensuring that disabled students know they are wanted at school. Educators and school administrators should actively include and value students with disabilities within the school and classroom communities. Fostering a sense of social belonging may be done through actively developing positive and supportive peer relationships between students. Academically, this may look like developing activities and learning materials that incorporate diverse experiences.

It is also important to consider that the burden of advocacy is often placed on disabled students from a very young age. Teachers, administrators and caregivers should work to advocate alongside students with disabilities rather than expecting the student to take on that burden. One way in which educators, administrators and parents can facilitate this is by creating open lines of communication between each other so that a student does not have the burden of relaying information. As highlighted by the individuals who shared their stories, many disabled students become self-advocates at a very young age which can have a significant impact on a student's experience at school. Parents, educators, and school administrators should collaborate with students by amplifying student voice, and challenging systemic barriers that disabled students may face.

Educators may also involve students with disabilities in creating supports in the classroom so that students can co-create their learning environments in the ways that work well for them. This also highlights the importance of recognizing that disabled students are the experts on their own experiences, and their experiences are invaluable in informing inclusive school communities. This may also look like developing Advisory Committees of disabled students who can help shape the classroom and school community.

Further, professional development and teacher training should also highlight inclusive practices and should be informed by students with disabilities themselves. Educators and school administrators should be supported in developing their knowledge and skills in supporting students with disabilities in the classroom. This may include developing working groups comprised of educators, school administrators and students to explore what inclusive practices are currently being engaged in, and where there is room for growth within the school community.

Impact on the Researcher

I am grateful for the opportunity to have spoken with these five people, and for them to have shared their stories with me. Working on this research project for three years has taught me many valuable lessons. Namely surrounding reflexivity, and the importance of stories; stories we experience, stories we tell ourselves, and stories we are told about ourselves. Grounding myself in a narrative methodology took time, I had to challenge years of learned research "truths" to fully understand the power that stories hold. Even the shortest of stories, and the smallest of research projects, can be woven together to create a larger narrative. But even without that larger narrative, smaller stories matter. The impact that research has is not only in the findings or results it produces, it is also in the interactions with people, and people's knowledge and stories. During every interview I completed, each person shared with me, in different ways, that they had never been provided space to share in this way. It was in those moments that I truly felt the impact of this work.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the lived experiences of disabled students throughout their K-12 journeys in special education through a narrative approach. There is a lack of research in this area that is guided by students with disabilities. The participants in this study shared their own unique stories, each of them with their own individual experiences. Across these stories, themes of a lack of a sense of belonging, difficulties with times of transition, and familial support systems were shared. The value that student voice brings to this research is immeasurable. The five themes that were created: (1) lack of belonging, (2) learning life lessons earlier than peers, (3) the role of support systems, (4) the impact of special education services, and (5) times of transition provide a student-informed understanding of what it means to experience school as a student with a disability. This study contributes to a growing conversation in disability and special education research that centers the lived-experiences of disabled students. In centering students' voices, this work allows students holistic stories to emerge, challenging the more deficit-based work that has been done in the past. This work emphasizes the importance of moving towards educational practices that are created with disabled students. In doing this, we can create educational spaces where disabled students are fully included, heard, and valued as co-creators of their learning environments.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Guiding research question

What were the experiences of individuals with disabilities in inclusive education through K-12?

a. Consent reminder

Review the consent form, remind of the right to withdraw and/or pass on questions, audio recording reminder.

b. Intro

Thank you for being here today.

Introduce myself.

c. Question

I. What is the story you most want to tell from your K-12 experience in special education?
    A. Can you tell me about a success story from your K-12 special education experience?
    B. Can you tell me about a challenge you had to overcome in this experience?

D. Possible prompts

- Tell me more about that.
- What happened next?
- What did this mean for you?
- What was that like for you?
- How did you know?
- What did you learn from that?

- How did this influence you moving forward?
- Can you give me an example?

F. Demographics

1. Age
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
2. What is your gender identity?
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
3. Race
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
4. Ethnicity
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
5. Indigenous status
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
6. Nationality
    a. ________________
    b. Prefer not to answer
7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    a. Elementary school

   b. High school
   c. Undergraduate degree
   d. Trade or College degree
   e. Graduate degree
   f. Prefer not to answer

8. What disability do you have?
   a. ________________
   b. Prefer not to answer

E. Wrap up

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Explain next steps (member checks).

Thank participants.

Available resources

- On campus

  SSD

  CAL

  STEPS Forward

- Community

  Victoria Disability Resource Center

  Pathways Victoria

Appendix B. Guidelines for interviewer preparation

- Everyone conducts *at least* one virtual and one in person practice interview.
- Record both practices.

- Researcher notes
    - Self-reflection after each interview, what went well? What do you wish you had done differently?
- Group discussions after the practice.

Appendix C. Consent Form

Project Title, Purpose, and Objective: You are invited to participate in a project entitled "Experiences of Disability across Learners, Families and Community", that explores the educational experiences of students with disabilities. The objective of this project is to inform the development of inclusive and accessible practices for students with disabilities across educational contexts. This project is being conducted by Professor Breanna Lawrence, Professor, University of Victoria Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies. Several graduate students may also be involved in this research as part of the requirements for a degree in Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies. You may contact Rose Vukovic, Principal Investigator (PI) at rvukovic@uvic.ca.

Importance of Research. The perspectives of individuals with disabilities are rarely centered in education research. Listening to the lived experiences of students with disabilities is crucial for informing research and practice relating to inclusive education.

Participants Selection. You are being asked to participate in this project because you self-identify as having a disability. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary.

What is Involved. If you consent to take part in this project, your participation will include:

- **Procedures:** Individual interviews and follow up communications.
- **Methods:** Audio-tapes and hand-written notes will be taken. A transcription will be made of the audio recordings. Transcriptions will be returned to participants for review.
- **Duration:** 45 minutes – 1 hour
- **Location:** University of Victoria campus or Zoom call or other private space.

Inconvenience. Participation in this project may cause some inconveniences to you including the time devoted to complete the interview.

Risks. There are some potential risks to you by participating in this project and they include discomfort, embarrassment, and/or stress when answering questions or sharing your experiences. To minimize these risks the following steps have been taken

- Interview protocols and interview questions have been reviewed by an advisory board.
- Support resources that are available on campus and/or locally will be provided to you.
- You may choose not to answer any question(s) during the interview.
- You may choose to end the interview at any point.

Benefits. There are no direct benefits to participating in this project. What we learn from you can be used to inform policy, practice and advocacy in inclusive education.

Compensation. As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given a gift card with the value of $20.

Voluntary Participation. Your participation in this project must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation, including after you sign this consent form. You have the right to skip questions you'd prefer not to answer. Refusing to participate will not affect your education in any way.
If you do withdraw from the study:

- You can decide whether to include or exclude your data from the analyses.
- You will still receive compensation listed above as an appreciation for any time given.

Anonymity. To protect your anonymity, your name will be changed within data analysis and any report of the results. This unique identifier will be linked to your name in a separate file should you wish to be contacted for follow-up interviews. Only the principal investigator (PI) will have access to the file that links participant names with unique identifiers. Your identifying details (name, job, appearance, etc) will not be stated in any literature.

Confidentiality. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be secured on a password protected computer accessible only by The University of Victoria's secure storage network.

Future Use of Data. Once your participation in this study is complete, your secured and de-identified data will be stored by the PI. If you consent, we may use your anonymized data for future projects that address the same research purpose. If you are interested in participating in follow-up interviews or related projects, you may provide your consent below for the research team to contact you.

Dissemination of Results. The results of this study may be shared with others in the following ways: theses, dissertations, articles, chapters, books, presentations at scholarly meetings, policy documents directed towards service providers or others involved in the education of students with disabilities, etc.

Disposal of Data. Any paper files will be shredded and destroyed after data analysis and entry. Archived data will remain encrypted on a password protected computer accessed by the PI as described above.

Questions or Concerns. If you have any questions or concerns at any point before, during or after your participation, you may contact:

- Professor Rose Vukovic by Email at rvukovic@uvic.ca
- You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria, (250) 472-4545 ethics@uvic.ca

<u>Consent</u>. Your signature below indicates that you are 19 or above, you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

______________________________	______________________________	________________
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

I consent to being contacted following my interview to review the transcript and initial analysis. If you consent, please provide a contact email.

______________________________	______________________________	________________
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

Contact email: ______________

Future Use of Data

I consent/do not consent (circle one) to the use of my data in future research: ______________ (Participant to provide initials)

I consent/do not consent (circle one) to be contacted in the event my data is requested for future research: ______________ (Participant to provide initials) If you consent, please provide a contact email ________________

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.