Challenging ableism and supporting students with exceptionalities within the mainstream classroom

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ABSTRACT

This Master of Teaching Research Project is a qualitative study that addresses the topic of challenging ableism within a mainstream classroom environment. The existing literature on challenging ableism within this educational setting suggests that learning in this inclusive classroom is successful in fostering positive peer relationships, educating students on the different needs of their peers and different abilities, as well as accepting and appreciating diversity. With this in mind, this study aims to explore how educators achieve these results and foster success for all students. This study is guided by the following question: How do a small sample of elementary teachers working in inclusive classrooms challenge ableism through their everyday teaching practices, and what outcomes do they observe in terms of relationships between exceptional students and their peers? Themes within this study include the Inclusive Classroom, teaching and learning about diverse exceptionalities, and empathy and acceptance towards all individuals. As a beginning teacher, I hope to recognize the strategies used in an inclusive classroom which challenges ableism, so that I can instill equity and opportunities for success for all of my students.

Key Words: Ableism, Exceptionalities, Inclusion, Diversity, Empathy, Acceptance, Safety, and Classroom Environment
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Chapter One: Introduction / Research Design

1.0 Research Context

Increasingly, education systems across North America are moving toward integrating inclusive practices into classrooms. In Canada, inclusive education (IE) has been implemented to meet the needs of students with exceptional needs. IE is “the process of educating children with disabilities in the regular education classrooms of their schools—the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability—and providing them with the necessary services and support” (Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin, 2001, p. 266). Thus, teachers are required to adapt their practices to meet the needs of these students. Depending on the need, students with special needs are spending portions of their school day in general education classrooms. This movement has created a responsibility for general education to ensure students with special needs have access to the general education curriculum (Prater, Redman, Anderson, & Gibb, 2014). In Canada, all provincial and territorial ministries of education have either formally adopted and implemented IE frameworks or include practices in alignment with inclusive frameworks (McCrimon, 2015). This movement of implementing IE within Ontario classrooms seems to find its importance. In 2007, there were 191,902 students identified with exceptional needs in Ontario’s publicly funded school system, and another 98,823 not identified, but receiving services (Ministry of Education, as cited in Kitchen & Dean, 2010, p. 225). With the numbers of exceptional students clearly rising, the responsibilities of teachers continue to grow.

There is a model which builds off of IE which is called the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL recognizes that all students bring unique social and academic backgrounds to the classroom, and therefore there is a need to change teachers discourse and practice (Katz, 2015).
Components of the UDL structure include learning activities that are differentiated in means of engagement, representation and presentation in order to foster the most facilitation and inclusion of all students (Katz, 2015). This new classroom framework works to target the strengths of students with exceptional classroom needs, and foster the most beneficial experiences.

When thinking about inclusivity and UDL, it is necessary to remember that it extends beyond the student’s academic needs. Inclusionary practices can foster diversity within the classroom environment, reducing beliefs of ableism. Ableism is the mistreatment of individuals who have different abilities that do not fit the normalized standards prescribed by society (Gabel, 2005). Succinctly put, ableism is “discrimination in favour of the able-bodied and able-minded” (Gabel, 2005, p. 4). In schools, ableism is defined as as,

devalu[es]...disability result[ing] in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids...In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids. (Hehir, 2002, p. 3)

Kang (2009) explains that, there are educators who do not implement an inclusive learning environment, which results in negative stigmas and experiences to the exceptional pupils within the classroom. He emphasizes the importance of implementing practice which challenge ableism within the classroom in order to benefit all students. Theorists have produced findings of the inclusive classroom which challenge ableism. Berry (2011) argues that, “inclusionary education implemented by teachers, result in benefits such as academic achievement, increased peer acceptance and richer friendship networks, higher self-esteem, avoidance of stigma attached to
pull-out programs and possible lifetime benefits after leaving school” (p. 628). These findings represent the beneficial outcomes when integrating inclusivity within schools. In the inclusive classroom, the needs of all students are met, and may simultaneously work to combat ableist beliefs.

1.1 Research Problem

Although, there has been a movement towards inclusivity, it is important to think about the challenges educators face when trying to instill an inclusive learning environment. As cited in (Berry, 2011), “the adequacy of knowledge, training and resources has been an enduring theme among educators concerned with effective inclusion programs” (Kamens, Loprete, and Slostad 2003; Lopes et al. 2004). While teachers may acknowledge how important an inclusionary classroom may be, many of them believe that more personnel are needed to offer effective inclusion programs (Idol, 2006). Canadian educators experience multiple challenges in their classrooms, including increasing class sizes, longer working hours, reduction of funding to support learning initiatives, and demands by administration and/or parents to meet or exceed curricular demands (Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, 2008). Creating an inclusive classroom environment involves practice, knowledge, and training. Alice Eriks-Brophy and JoAnne Whittingham (2013) performed a research study on educators and their attitudes toward inclusion of students with exceptional needs. Teacher participants indicated that their teacher education programs had insufficiently prepared them to teach these students. The results highlight the need for increased emphasis on the understanding of students’ unique educational needs in the curriculum of teacher education programs in order to combat ableism. The provision of appropriate supports to both teachers and students in order to promote success in inclusive classrooms is also posed as a challenge.
In addition to the challenges teachers face when creating an inclusive learning environment, many are unaware of the ableism that exists within classrooms. It becomes invisible and often unrecognized as important (Storey, 2007). Kevin Storey (2007), argues that schools struggle with inclusion of students with disabilities and ableism may play an influential role as to why they are often excluded. This challenge extends from ableist beliefs being ingrained within societal norms. Although some teachers may be aware of how to create inclusivity on an academic level, what is sometimes missed is the inclusion extending to a social context. By formatting inclusionary practices amongst peers and everyday classroom atmosphere, teachers can find inclusive strategies that challenge ableism. In this sense, students become surrounded by their exceptional peers in positive ways that demonstrate that these individuals are capable, and that disability is normal.

1.2 Research Purpose

In light of this problem, the primary goal of my research is to learn how teachers working in an inclusive classroom are challenging ableism through everyday educational and social practices. My purpose is to discover new and enriched ways that teachers are extending inclusivity beyond academics. As a future educator, who will have many experiences with exceptional pupils, I would like to understand how teachers are enforcing strategies that combat ableism, and what response they receive from peers. I want to understand the different ways in which teachers talk to students about their exceptional peers without reproducing negative stigmas. I believe the language we use when talking to and about the exceptional pupils can either challenge ableism, or produce it. Lastly, I want to learn the ways in which teachers are committing to reducing ableism and what the responses from students are.
1.3 Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study is: How do a small sample of elementary teachers working in inclusive classrooms challenge ableism through their everyday teaching practices, and what outcomes do they observe in terms of relationships between exceptional students and their peers?

Subsidiary Questions

Subsidiary questions include:

- What does ableism mean to these teachers?
- What are some of the key instructional approaches and strategies teachers use to challenge ableism in their teaching practices?
- How do these teachers develop a commitment to challenging ableism, and why do they believe this work is important?
- What challenges are educators experiencing when challenging ableism in their teaching practices? How do teachers respond to these challenges?

1.4 Reflexive Positioning Statement

As someone who has a special needs sister, this issue holds very dear to my heart. My sister Alicia was born two years before me with a mental developmental delay, a speech and language impediment, and a behavioral exceptionality. Being only a few years apart in age, I was able to experience my elementary and secondary years of education with her. Many experiences of my sister’s daily school life were not always positive. In these classrooms, there was no awareness of the challenges that existed in her learning and social life. By not educating students in the general classroom about the special needs of exceptional pupils, their voices are silenced. Her peers could not quite understand her. Although she does have several exceptionalities, she is quite able to carry a conversation and voice her emotions and opinions.
Unfortunately, in these non-inclusive classrooms, she was not given these opportunities, and instead was recognized solely for her exceptionalities. In addition to this, she was sometimes excluded from the general classroom environment, as teachers did not accommodate the learning for her and she was left out of many group and partner activities. I do recognize the fact that my sister could not produce work at the same level as several of her peers, but with some modifications to the activities, and she could definitely complete the task. In these cases, she was constantly excluded from classroom work. This allowed friendships to form without my sister. For several years my sister had birthday parties at our house with no friends joining the festivities. This may have been from the ableist beliefs that were reproduced in many of her classrooms. Her peers saw her as the “disabled student” rather than anything else. Incorporating inclusivity and challenging ableism in the classroom can create positive experiences for exceptional students. When my sister was in Grade Six, and I was in Grade Four, she had a teacher that constantly worked to meet her needs. Alicia was included in classroom work, made many friends, and excelled academically far beyond her previous elementary years. I remember that year at her birthday party she had close to ten of her peers show up to our house to celebrate. Needless to say, the teachers learning environment made a difference in her experience socially and academically.

My experiences with my sister have inspired me to focus my research on the teachers who implement an inclusive environment and work to challenge ableism. As a future educator, and someone who has lived with a special needs person my entire life, I understand that this issue is quite sensitive to some people. I want to find ways in which I can create peer awareness with my students in ways that do not single out exceptional pupils, nor reproduce stigmas. I want to find strategies that demonstrate to my students, that these exceptionalities should not be
viewed in idiosyncratic ways. By making my students in the general classroom aware of the needs of exceptional pupils, I will work toward eliminating ableist labels. I believe there are ways in which teachers can use the inclusive classroom to challenge ableism and create positive relationships amongst exceptional pupils and their peers.

1.5 Preview of the whole

For my research, I will be conducting a qualitative study interviewing three elementary school teachers on the strategies they implement in an inclusive classroom which challenge ableism. I will sample this small group of teachers who are fostering inclusive techniques to create a classroom community that promotes awareness, inclusivity and a non-ableist pedagogy. In Chapter Two, I will use a critical and sociological lens to examine the literature in the context of the inclusive classroom and how educators are breaking down social stigmas and ableist views of exceptional pupils. For Chapter Three, I will dive into the research methodology of my study. This facet will focus on my methodological approach as well as my data collection. In Chapter Four, I will report my research findings and discuss the results in reference to the existing literature. To conclude, in Chapter Five, I will illustrate the significance of my research and how educators can use these practices in their classrooms.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Before beginning this chapter, I would first like to note that I will constantly refer to special needs students as “exceptional pupils”. As cited in Kitchen & Dean (2010), the Education Act (Bill 82) in Ontario identifies an “exceptional pupil” as “a pupil whose
behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program” (p. 226). In blatant terms, the exceptional pupil I refer to is a student who has a special need or in other words, a disability. As I discuss later in the chapter, I prefer to use the term exceptional pupil as I believe the language we use within society and classrooms plays a strong component of the focal issue I am exploring. Within this chapter, I review the current literature discussing the common themes arising for inclusionary practices within the general education classroom environment. More specifically, my focus of review illustrates ways in which educators are including students with special educational needs while reducing ableism, and instilling positive peer awareness. I first review different definitions and studies that break down ableism and how it has effected the Canadian education system.

2.1 Conceptualizing Ability

This research project aims to find ways in which educators are reducing ableism while working in traditional classrooms. It is important to first understand what ableism means and how it was constructed. Laura Rauscher and Mary McClintock (1996) define ableism as,

a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities. . . . Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable (p. 198).

The definitions above share the idea that ableism creates a dichotomy between those who
are socially constructed as able and disabled (Kang, 2009). Thus, ableism discriminates against those who are considered disabled and places socialized stigmas on this community of people. It has been argued that non-disabled people overwhelmingly control social discourses in a positive way, while disabled people are positioned as having less power (Kang, 2009). Ableism portrays a disability as a status of defect, instead of a difference. For example, Thomas Hehir (2002), tells a story of Joe Ford, who was born with disabilities in 1983. His mother Penny reflects on her encounter with a social worker in preschool who made it clear to Penny that she could not have the same aspirations for Joe that she had for her other children. This assumption that a person with a disability could not excel in the same ways as an able person, presents a vivid example of socially constructed ableist beliefs. Although the social worker was empathetic, her belief that Joe should not have the same dreams as an abled person, entirely excludes him from society and reinforces ableism. Despite the fact that since 1983 movements to eliminate these stigmas have been put in place, negative cultural assumptions of exceptional individuals still exist today.

2.1.1 Ableist language

The language we use to describe an exceptional person is highly influenced by ableism. When examining the way society talks about disability, Dunn and Andrews (2015) argue that two models have molded our language. The moral and medical models are at the core of the way we see and talk about disabilities today. The moral model is influenced by religion where individuals with disabilities were often referred to in derogatory terms (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). The language used to define people with disabilities within this model, portrayed them as a result of sin, or in a pitiful state. Terms such as “cripple” or “gimp” were used as descriptive terms (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). The second model is the medical model, which is quite influential in
the way we speak in Canada today (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Under this model, individuals are solely defined by their impairments which supports ableist beliefs. Exceptional individuals become equated with their disabilities through the medical model and ableism. Some examples used under the medical model are terms such as “the retarded”, or “the deaf-mutes”. Both Dunn and Andrews (2015), argue that by classifying and referring to people primarily on their disability, it becomes the sole way we see them and they are subordinated by their exceptionality. This language stems from beliefs that an exceptional person is burdened by their disability and thus produces ableist language. By using either of these models to talk about exceptional people, these individuals become defined by their disabilities. This language reinforces the ableist stigmatizations that a disabled person is incapable because of their exceptionality.

Dunn and Andrews (2015) discuss the shift of the social model which a pioneer in rehabilitation psychology, social psychologist Beatrice A. Wright, used to object to language that dehumanized people with disabilities (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). She argued that when we talk about an exceptional person we should use person-first language. In this context, the emphasis is placed on the person before the disability. Her research exemplifies that using “a person with a disability” rather than a “disabled person” promotes their individuality and helps combat ableism (Wright, 1983 as cited in Dunn & Andrews, 2015, p.258). Contradictory to this model, it has been argued that this person-first approach implies that there is something negative about disability. A national advocacy organization, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), has elected to use identity-first language and to reject person-first language as they strongly oppose this language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Instead, they argue for the minority model, which they believe portrays disability as neutral and natural (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).
“Advocates of this model argue that disability is often an overlooked individual experience, and that the major impediment in the lives of people is ableism” (Dunn & Andrews, 2015, p. 261).

### 2.1.2 Ableism in education

Research argues that socially constructed beliefs on exceptional individuals have a negative effect on the education system (Kang, 2009). Ableism has become a dominant sociocultural belief, which has circulated into schools (Kang, 2009). Researchers such as Kang (2009), demonstrate that the “abled” person and “disabled” person dichotomy has influenced the school curriculum and environment. It is argued that sometimes, the stigmatization is submersed into schools without realizing it (Kang, 2009). School textbooks and curriculum requirements have been recognized as reproducing ableism by constantly idealizing and representing able people within texts and literature used in the classroom. Students and teachers often enter into context that is dominated by ableist beliefs that exceptional pupils are not able to fulfill curricular tasks as well as their peers. It has been argued that ableism becomes invisible in schools and results in negative effects for exceptional students (Hehir, 2002). These negative cultural assumptions about disability reinforce stigmatizations and contribute to low levels of educational success and employment (Hehir, 2002, p. 4). Hehir (2002) explores evidence in his research that ableist assumptions have become a main cause of educational inequities which I will identify below. Disability theorists want to illustrate that ableism “actually involves practices and attitudes that induce other forms of impairment and injury” (Campbell, 2009, p. 17). Campbell (2009) explores the effects of ableism in education: the lives of people with disabilities are devalued because they function differently than most people in society, and people with disabilities are subject to lowered expectations. Both of these ableist outcomes prevent people with disabilities from fully excelling in mainstream society and education.
Challenging Ableism in Mainstream Classrooms

(Hehir, 2002) takes narratives of disabled people and their parents to illustrate examples of how their disability became the focus of their young lives and denied them of many opportunities taken for granted by nondisabled people (p.4). For example, he looks at dyslexic students and examines their learning experiences. As cited in Hehir (2002), he presents findings that students with learning disabilities drop out of school about twice that of nondisabled students (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto & Newman, 1993). More recent data also shows that these students fail statewide assessments at alarming rates (Hehir, 2002). With ableism existent in the classroom, exceptional pupils become segregated from the whole group environment and are thus subject to improper education which results in these unfortunate findings (Hehir, 2002). They are viewed through an ableist lens as they are noticed for their disabilities, rather than things they have and can achieve. In addition to academic achievement, these students may begin to focus on how they are different from their peers and develop insecurities. Eriks-Brophy and Whittinham (2013) argue that these insecurities develop from ableism, and have resulted in lower academic success and peer relationships. Students become more segregated from the classroom. It has been found that 50% of academic underachievement of exceptional pupils is due to the practices of the teacher (Marschark, Spencer, Adams & Sapere, 2011). In these situations, Hehir (2002) argues that educators view exceptional students through an ableist lens alone, they are subject to inappropriate, non-inclusive educational environments. He argues that by regarding exceptional pupils for their learning disabilities alone, ableist assumptions arise and may have a negative influence on their educational experience (Hehir, 2002, p. 13). The academic needs of the students are not met, and they are misrepresented within the classroom.
2.2 Canadian Context: Laws & Legislation Related to Exceptional Pupils

Canadian law requires placement of exceptional pupils in regular classes, depending on their needs (Kitchen & Dean, 2010). Advocates and awareness led to the changes made in Bill 82 in Ontario which created a shift toward providing more inclusive education. The 1980 amendments to the Act included mandating universal access, “in which all children were to have a placement in a school setting regardless of disability or special educational needs” (Jordan, 2001, p.352). The most recent ratification was in 2010 on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This change specifically committed Canada to eliminating barriers to accessibility in schools, accommodating students with disabilities in schools, and ensuring that people with disabilities are treated equally (Kitchen & Dean, 2010). This movement of inclusivity has challenged ableist presumptions that exceptional pupils cannot excel in a general education environment. As exceptional pupils are now integrated within the general education classroom, they spend less time, and sometimes none, in a segregated special educational environment.

2.2.1 Twenty-first century classrooms

Researchers such as Katz (2015) believe that these legal changes were at surface level, and more changes are to be made at the classroom level. These new legislations have begun to transform twenty-first century classrooms which go beyond simply integrating the exceptional pupil. In Canada, education is a provincial jurisdiction, and each province must have policies related to inclusion (Timmons, 2006 as cited in Katz, 2015). Specifically, in Ontario, schools are required to foster inclusion as ‘the integration of exceptional pupils into local community classrooms, when the placement meets the pupil’s needs and is in accordance to parental choice’
(Jordan, 2001, p. 353). The inclusive movement has brought twenty-first century Canadian classrooms to changes such as the inclusive classroom and UDL (Katz, 2015). As cited in Katz (2015), the response to inclusivity is generated by the increased levels of diversity within schools (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). With this inclusive movements, exceptional pupils were integrated into the general education classrooms with a special education teacher present (Idol, 2006). As the numbers of diversifying needs grew, inclusive frameworks were implemented in Canadian classrooms in order to provide success for all students.

2.3 Classroom Frameworks

With the new legislations set in place, there has been movement of conceptualizing and integrating new frameworks into Canadian classrooms. As these new legal implications have placed new responsibilities on general education teachers, their classrooms become more diverse. In response to this, the education system has put new policies into practice which provide a framework for teachers working with exceptional students in an integrated setting. I will specifically be discussing what the research says on the inclusive classroom, and the universal design for learning. This new movement of inclusionary and universal practices have been established as a response to these new legalities.

2.3.1 Inclusive learning

School districts across Canada and the United States have been required to implement inclusive programming in classrooms, affecting the education of children with a wide variety of special needs (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013 p.64). As cited in Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham (2013), the primary objective of inclusion is to support and provide exceptional pupils to the general education curriculum and with opportunities for learning in the least
restrictive environment (Blecker & Boakes, 2010; Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010; Heiman, 2004; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Appropriate adaptations to the curriculum, instructional materials, teaching strategies, and the classroom environment, are effective inclusive practices which support exceptional pupils (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). As cited in Anne Jordan (2001), teachers who successfully implement inclusion, integrate their students with disabilities in the main work of the classroom, adapting their instructional presentations and the format by which their students respond, often in ways that are invisible to the other students (Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovich, 1997; Roach, 1998). They use a variety of teaching techniques that are accessible to all students while specifically useful to some, along the principles of universal access and universal design (McDonnel, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). With this movement towards inclusion, past assumptions about special education and general education as separate systems are working together (Moores, 1996).

Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013), argue that special needs students exposed to inclusive practices result in substantial benefits in both academics and social skills. These developments start in the classroom environment, and eventually extend to social contexts (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013 p. 65). Several theorists argue that inclusivity within a classroom reaps substantial benefits for students with exceptionalities on a social and academic level. As the needs of exceptional pupils are met, and they are included within the environment as a whole, ableism begins to find its way out of the classroom. Research tells us that, a child who has been provided with the proper services they need, may successfully function in a regular classroom (Hehir, 2002, p. 3). Jepma (2003) expanded on this idea through his research on students with exceptionalities working in general education classrooms implementing inclusivity.
He mainly focused on academic levels including language, math and socio-emotional functioning through a questionnaire completed by the teacher. He found that students with exceptionalities in a regular education classroom made more progress in language and math (Jepma, 2003). His research tells us that a group of exceptional pupils being taught in an inclusive environment have resulted in academic benefits.

Educators working in an inclusive classroom, begin by modifying their instruction, and can also find ways to combat ableism. Research wants us to know that inclusivity challenges ableism by solidifying that all students are equal (Storey, 2007). By presenting an equal status between both groups of students, individuals without disabilities may begin to see their exceptional peers through a new lens which reject ableist beliefs. Implementing an equal status within a classroom derives from inclusivity. Storey (2007) explores some strategies teachers can implement to solidify equality between exceptional students and peers is by including books that discuss disabilities. What he specifies is to use literature that does not tokenize a person with a disability, but presents the character in a positive light. He also discusses bringing videos into the classroom which illustrate exceptional individuals as active members of society; one who is employed, one who is a mentor, one who is an activist. Storey (2007) argues within his findings that these inclusive activities mentioned above challenge ableism as they present exceptional persons as able, as opposed to disabled. With these few examples, Storey (2007) states that students will begin to see the exceptional pupil as someone society can admire instead of someone to pity or “fix”. When an educator finds ways to implement inclusivity, ableism is challenged and these students begin to excel because of it.

The current literature demonstrates that students with exceptionalities, who were educated in non-ableist environments have moved on to accessing higher education after high
school or to jobs (Hehir, 2002). Inclusion has been argued to propose benefits for children without disabilities by offering a wider social acceptance and understand of disability, an increased awareness and respect for diversity, growth in tolerance and enhanced socioeconomical growth (Eriks-Brophy & Whittinham, 2013, p. 65). Myklebust (2007) investigated the effects of inclusionary educational practices. His study focused on the development of 494 students with exceptional needs such as general learning difficulties, difficulties with reading, writing or math. He found a positive effect of inclusive education. Specifically, Myklebust (2007) argued that the inclusive classes were 76% more likely to obtain formal qualifications than students receiving education in segregated special education rooms. These researchers and theorists argue that these new movements that have been set in place across North America, have resulted in increased commitment in special education by providing inclusive measures and reducing ableist beliefs.

In spite of these advantages proposed by many researchers, critics suggest that inclusivity has done very little to increase access to the general education classroom for exceptional pupils. In fact, Eriks-Brophy & Whittinham (2013) identify critics who believe that an inclusive classroom is detrimental on exceptional pupil’s participation and achievement. It has been argued that the student may feel apprehensive about participating in the general classroom amongst peers. Exceptional pupils may experience anxiety that they do not know the answer, and choose not to participate. This contrary area of research argues that exceptional pupils may experience awareness that they are not as successful as their peers and develop a low self esteem (Lloyd, 2008). Savich (2008) opposes inclusivity by arguing that the general education classroom is too large, and there is not enough time for teachers to specifically respond to all learning needs. This can result in lower educational levels as students are not receiving the one-
on-one attention. Lloyd (2008) also criticized inclusion arguing that his research found that instead of promoting equality among students, this policy instead perpetuates educational and social injustices and reaffirms a deficit perspective on exceptional pupils. Additionally, Rogers and Thiery (2003) also argue against inclusive classrooms. They investigated performance of American students with exceptionalities in an inclusive setting in comparison to the separate special education class. Their study investigated five students with an exceptionality in a class of seventeen. They found results that show a negative effect of inclusion. Four out of five students showed a decrease in performance after their reading lessons were moved from the special education class to the inclusive classroom, while only one student’s performance improved in the inclusive setting (Rogers & Thiery, 2003).

2.3.2 Universal design for learning

With the movement of implementing the inclusive model, teachers were expected to teach exceptional pupils within the general education classroom (Idol, 2006). Jennifer Katz (2015) argues that today’s classroom is much more complicated, as the number of students with different challenges and exceptionalities increase. The inclusive classroom and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), carry some similarities, but Katz (2015) believes UDL improves engagement and enjoyment of learning for all students and teachers. UDL focuses on a strengths-based approach for students with and without exceptionalities (Katz, 2015). Essentially, UDL focuses on practices that are designed for multiple types of learners, instead of implementing several types of programs for different students (Rose & Meyer, 2002). It has been argued to take the important elements of inclusive instruction, and extend the engagement, learning, and social aspects of the classroom to greater levels. Katz (2015) discusses the three-part learning block of UDL. The first block emphasizes Respecting Diversity (RD), which helps
teachers create a classroom climate that improves students’ self-concept, sense of belonging, and respect for diversity in peers. This block specifically works on challenging ableism in the classroom. By promoting and implementing diversity within the classroom, students respect exceptional pupil’s differences and a sense of belonging begins to form. In block two, there is a planning process which assists teachers in creating lesson plans that are accessible to diverse learners. It promotes higher thinking, engagement, participation, and reduces challenging behavior. The final block explores systematic variables such as resources, service delivery, and so forth (Katz, 2015, p. 4).

Within their study, Bernacchio and Mullen (2007) found benefits in UDL and how it limits the need for extensive modification of instructional lesson plans year after year as teachers encounter new students with diverse needs (p. 52). Bernacchio and Mullen (2007) also argue that in their findings, UDL reduces ableism in the classroom by minimizing attention to disabilities and impairments, and shifts the institutional focus towards specific skill areas that are critical to learning. Within their study, they found that UDL practices can help exceptional pupils excel as their specific disabilities are no longer stigmatized as a defect (Bernacchio & Mullen, 2007). As the respect for diversity is emphasized with UDL processes, the exceptional pupil begins to feel a sense of safety and comfort within the classroom. Researchers believe that UDL challenges the idea of “one size fits all” (Abell, Jung, Taylor, 2011). The classroom environment becomes a universal atmosphere including every student of the classroom. This universal lens has been argued by researchers to reduce ableist beliefs amongst peers by placing an emphasis on the word universal (Abell et al. 2011). Students are not only learning together as a whole, but their ableist beliefs are challenged as diversity is talked about and admired within this type of classroom. Abell et al. (2011), argues that within their findings, by offering UDL approaches
into the classroom, exceptional and non-exceptional students demonstrated more interest, participation, academic success, and comprehension (p.182). Katz (2015) also believes that UDL results in substantial benefits for all members of the classroom. She examined classrooms of fifty-eight teachers throughout grades one to twelve in ten different schools in Manitoba, Canada. She found that teachers emphasized implementing the UDL three-block model reduced challenging behavior in the class and improved peer interactions (Katz, 2015). She states that teachers reported that it creates a more positive and safe learning environment for all students. She argues that with UDL, risk-taking also increased and student who previously had not felt comfortable or safe, had suddenly emerged as leaders (Katz, 2015).

Conversely, Carl Savich (2008) argues that the regular classroom environment, actually makes it more difficult for the universal design of learning as not all general education teachers will be well versed in this type of learning. He believes that the regular classroom can have negative effects on the ability of students with special needs to concentrate (Savich, 2008). Oppositional researchers believe exceptional pupils may become distracted by their surroundings, instead of in a smaller environment where there are not many disturbances (Savich, 2008). It is also argued that inclusivity reproduces ableism instead of challenging it. As cited in Eriks-Brophy and Whittinham (2013) several researchers believe that there is a risk that students will place labels on their exceptional peer as they recognize the differences amongst them. In addition to this, it is argued that within the general classroom setting, bullying arises by the peer group towards the exceptional pupil (De Monchy, Pijil & Zandberg, 2004). These researchers believe that, although the teacher may try to practice inclusivity, students actually become more aware of their exceptional peer in a negative context and reinforce the socially constructed dichotomy of able and disabled. The argument here, is that the universal design is
somewhat impossible to attain in a regular classroom, as special needs students will have much difficulty attending to the instructional content.

2.4 Both Positive and Negative Known Outcomes

Much of the literature regarding combating ableism within the classroom has found positive known outcomes of integrating exceptional pupils. Both of the classroom frameworks illustrated above play a pertinent role in reducing ableist beliefs amongst students. Some of the known outcomes argued by several research studies outlines the impact inclusivity and universality have on peer relationships.

2.4.1 Peer awareness

Several theorists and researchers believe in order to challenge ableism, it is critical to create an awareness amongst peers. One way to alleviate disability stereotypes is the use of ability awareness in which students and teachers without disabilities take part in simulated activities regarding having a disability (Storey, 2007, p. 57). This inclusive activity helps students become aware of the exceptional needs their peer(s) may have. This allows students to understand their exceptionality may make classroom tasks more difficult, but in most cases, the job will be completed, thus challenging ableist beliefs. Although it is vital to meet the needs of all students, some research argues that educators must not focus only on finding ways to “fix” or accommodate students with disabilities (Hehir, 2002). Instead, it is important to find ways to naturally integrate them the classroom. Hehir (2002) believes that education plays a central role in integrating disabled people in all aspects of society.

Teachers can resist constructing students as unable, and choose classroom management that is inclusive and presents disables students as the norm. By finding successful strategies to include these children, educators will demonstrate to peers that disability is a natural part of life
(Hehir, 2002, p. 27). “Inclusion also has proposed benefits for children without disabilities that include wider social acceptance and understanding of disability, increased awareness of and respect for diversity, growth in tolerance and social cognition, and enhanced self-concept and socioemotional growth” (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013, p. 66). Inclusive educational models are perceived as contributing to the promotion of equality among students, enhancement of social consciousness, and a reduction of the stigma that is often associated with children with special needs (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013 p. 65). Some studies examining the social integration of these students have concluded that inclusion provides opportunities for the development of friendships between children with and without special needs. Researchers argue that exceptional pupils experience no negative social or emotional consequences as a result of being educated in included environments (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013, p.66).

It is argued that by educating peers, this information can actually lead to a decrease in stigmatization as children have the opportunity to base their attitudes toward peers with disabilities on actual facts instead of preconceived ideas (Tavares, 2011, p. 26). As cited in Tavares (2011), research by Campbell, Ferguson, Herzinger, Jackson, and Marino (2004) suggests that combining an educational message with explanatory and descriptive information about a student with disabilities can positively influence attitudes. Thus, by talking about the exceptionality of the pupil, peers in the general classroom will be educated and informed, as opposed to making assumptions.

2.5 Classroom Variables that Effect Ableism

It is imperative to recognize the variables within a classroom that effect the experience of an exceptional pupil. Although there have been inclusive practices put into place within a
Canadian context, there are still some setbacks that exist within the work of inclusivity. Some of these setbacks include the role physical space and teacher attitudes have on supporting students with exceptionalities.

2.5.1 Role of physical space

Universal design also extends beyond the classroom curriculum only. It also expands to the structure, design and environment of an educational institute. The movement towards universal schools, allows for access without extraordinary means, and is based on the assumption that disabled people are numerous and should be able to lead regular lives (Hehir, 2002, p. 28). Unfortunately, there are still restrictions placed on individuals who may have a physical exceptionality. Dunn and Andrews (2015) argue that the physical construction of our society has not been designed with an exceptional person in mind. Within schools, it has been found that there are several physical barriers which make it extremely difficult for students to find comfort within an education setting. Society focuses more on their disability, rather than recognizing the barriers inhibiting exceptional people from fully participating in society (Dunn & Andrews, 2015, p. 258). The physical layout of school settings has been recognized to play a role in influencing the experience of exceptional pupils.

2.5.2 Teacher attitudes

Environmental variables that have been found to have a consistently positive effect on teacher attitudes toward inclusion involve access to training and to additional support personnel and assistants, smaller class size, and additional planning time (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) suggest that teachers support the idea of the inclusive classroom and are generally willing to expend the extra time and effort necessary to make the model work. They believe that the general classroom can provide benefits to students
with special needs, providing that the environmental variables are available (Eriks- Brophy & Whittinham, 2013, p. 85). In the study performed by Abell et al. (2011), they report that teachers feel that they have not been provided with the proper knowledge of universal design and thus have difficulty challenging ableism. The more prepared teachers are to meet a wide variety of student ability levels, through UDL, the more instructional impact they will have. (Abell et al., 2011). Sometimes teachers who have limited experience in inclusive classroom, actually result in more negative effects on the exceptional pupil (Marschark et al., 2011). As cited in Eriks-Brophy & Whittinham, 2013, Marschark et al., (2011) believes that unexperienced teachers teaching students with specific needs, does not allow them to capitalize on their cognitive strengths, abilities, and existing knowledge base in learning new material (p. 68). These theorists argue that the inclusive classroom may have positive effects on exceptional pupils, but if the teachers have not been educated on the practices, it can actually prove more detrimental to the students.

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined the research related to challenging ableism within the context of a general education classroom. I illustrate the classroom frameworks which have been found useful in eliminating ableist beliefs and improving academic achievement, diversity and respect. This review raises questions on the experiences of exceptional pupils within a general classroom setting, and what teachers are doing to make these experiences most beneficial. It also addresses the need to further investigate ableist challenging strategies to implement with all students on an academic and social realm. The review emphasizes the challenges teachers are facing, and the need to educate and support them on these universal and inclusive strategies in order to benefit all members of the classroom.
Within my further research, I hope to focus on teachers who are conceptualizing inclusivity or universal design for learning in their classrooms. I wish to contribute to the existing literature regarding challenging ableism within the classroom, as I truly believe it is a topic that becomes invisible, and is consequently not talked about. By finding educators who implement different strategies on this concept, I hope to provide a better understanding on ways in which we can reframe the minds of our students and challenge ableist beliefs.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology. I begin by reviewing the general approach and procedures to my study. I also discuss the data collection instruments, as well as the participant sampling criteria and recruitment process. I explain the data analysis procedures and review the ethical components relevant to my study. Furthermore, I illustrate a range of methodological limitations, but I also refer to the strengths of the methodology. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of the methodological decisions.

3.1 Research Approaches & Procedures

I will be conducting my research study by using a qualitative research approach. The study will include a review of the existing and relevant literature applicable to my research focus, as well as semi-structured interviews with three elementary school teachers, at both the primary, and junior level.

Qualitative research has been identified as being used to investigate broadly stated
questions about human experiences to produce rich, descriptive data that help identify the persons’ experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). Its goal is to explore the behavior, processes, meanings, values and experiences of sampled individuals in their “natural” context (Kitto, Chesters & Grbich, 2008; p. 243). As Anyan (2013) states, “Qualitative research often attempts to go beyond descriptions to provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, unlike quantitative researchers” (p. 1). This type of research is primarily explorative in its procedures; it is therefore perfectly suited in situations where the nature of the impacts are to be investigated (Kitto et al., 2008).

For the purpose of my study, my goal is to include the voices and real-life experiences and strategies from teachers. Qualitative analysis allows the researcher to investigate the area of study through discussions with seasoned participants (Yilmaz, 2013). Yilmaz (2013) argues that through conversation and dialogue, qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of a specific social setting. Its methods allow the researcher to understand how the area of study is experienced by the participants without predetermining those standpoints (Yilmaz, 2013). For my research, I am exploring a specific social setting (the mainstream classroom). In order to understand the relationship between ableism, inclusivity, and the classroom, it is important for myself as the researcher to interpret the participants’ experiences through each interview (Yilmaz, 2013). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative allows the researcher to hear comprehensive explanations of the participants’ personal struggles and successes about the topic at hand (Anyan, 2013). Thus, their responses will allow me to understand the phenomenon I am studying with the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Lastly, I am interested in discovering the the “hows” that quantitative studies aim to find. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for me to use.
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Qualitative research methods include interviewing, observation, and document analysis (Kitto et al., 2008). For my study, the primary instrument of data collection was the semi-structured interview protocol. Interviewing is a highly used method of collecting data in qualitative social research methods (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Kvale (1983), described the purpose of an interview as a method of data collection in social research as “...to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 174). Interviews can reach the parts of a study which other research methods cannot reach (Wellington, 2000). Interviewing will allow me to investigate strategies that I will not be able to observe. It also allows the researcher to hear details of real life accounts from participants who are experienced in the area pertinent to the study. The importance of interview as a method of data collection enables individuals to think and to talk about their predicaments, needs, expectations, experiences, and understandings. (Anyan 2013, p. 1). As cited in Anyan (2013), Kvale (2006) stated that the qualitative research interview can be objective by “letting the investigated object speak” in expressing the real nature of the phenomena of discussion (p. 1). This interview method is appropriate for my research because I wanted to learn about the details of strategies teachers use from their own personal experiences.

Furthermore, I have conducted semi-structured and face-to-face interviews. Wellington (2000) argues that semi-structured interviews are a valuable compromise between structured and unstructured. Semi-structured interviews are often flexible, not completely pre-determined, and the interviewer has more control, but there is room for participants to elaborate (Wellington, 2000). Yilmaz (2013) notes that face-to-face interviews allow for the researcher to collect detailed, complex, and extensive data. This has benefited me and my research as it helped shed
new light on the study. This gave me room as the interviewer to re-direct and delve into the participants’ responses in order to learn more.

I will identify in my protocol (Appendix B), five sections beginning with the participant’s background information, questions about their encounters with ableism, their experiences and beliefs related to challenging ableism, and concluding questions regarding challenges, and next steps for teachers. Semi-structured interviews are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Examples of my questions will include:

- What does ableism mean to you?
- What are you experiences with ableism within the mainstream classroom?
- In your view, what attitudes and behaviours are indicators of ableism?
- What strategies have you found to be successful in challenging ableism and celebrating exceptionalities?

3.3 Participants

In this section I review the sampling criteria that I have established for participant recruitment. I review the possible avenues for recruiting my teacher participants. It is crucial within my research to find participants who share similar commonalities towards my main study focus. I also recruit participants who meet the sampling criteria for the purpose of my research goal.

3.3.1. Sampling criteria

In order to adhere to the main focus of the study, teachers will have experience in the mainstream classroom for a minimum of five years. My sampling criteria also requires teachers
to have experience with at least five students with exceptionalities within the mainstream classroom. This is because I am interested in researching the experiences of exceptional students within the mainstream classroom only. I would also like the teachers to have practice from multiple students in order to gather data around more than one ableism challenging strategy. Furthermore, the participants will also have demonstrated a leadership in challenging ableism within the classroom. This leadership may be in the form of supporting or celebrating students and fostering diversity and inclusivity within the school community. Lastly, the participants will have at least one additional qualification or graduate degree regarding working with students with exceptionalities. This is because I want the teachers to have experience, but also academic educational knowledge in supporting these pupils. The sampling criteria will include the following:

1. Teachers will have been working as an educator in the mainstream classroom setting for a minimum of five years.

2. Teachers will have experience in teaching at least five different students with exceptionalities in the mainstream classroom setting.

3. Teachers will have demonstrated a leadership in teaching students with exceptionalities and/or challenging ableism within the classroom.

4. Teachers will have an additional qualification or graduate degree pertaining to students with exceptionalities.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures/recruitment

Deciding which qualitative sampling technique to use depends on the quality, research question, and overall outlook of the study (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). In a broad sense,
Sampling in qualitative research involves the selection of specific data sources that are pertinent to the goal of the study (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015). There are three methods to recruiting samples for a qualitative study; convenience, purposeful, and theoretical (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Convenience sampling refers to a sample that is readily available and accessible to the researcher (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Recruiting participants by a convenient sample may be conducive, but will still require effort in the selection process. The second sampling method, also plays a key role in qualitative research. Purposeful sampling usually involves a selection of a smaller number of participants that provides rich, in-depth understanding and experience about the main research question (Yilmaz, 2013). Often times, with purposeful sampling, the researcher specifically looks for participant who possess certain traits or qualities (Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 464). Although the recruitment may be smaller, this type of sampling will allow for sufficient insight on the research question. Lastly, theoretical sampling is a process in which gathering data is guided by an evolving theory, and the aim is to develop the theoretical properties (Gentles et al., 2015).

For the purpose of my study, I have utilized a combination of both convenience and purposeful sampling methods. As a teacher candidate who has completed two practicums in the primary grades, I have recruited participants through existing connections. Prior to my enrollment in the Master of Teaching program, I also completed several volunteer hours at different schools within both the York Region and Toronto District School Boards which allowed me create relationships and connections with other educators. I have provided these individuals with a synopsis of my central area of research, as well as an outline of the interview process, for them to deliver to teachers who they believe may be interested in participating. I also employed snowball sampling by asking participants to recommend any educators who may
provide knowledge on my research focus (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). I provided my information to assure the participants are willingly volunteering in the study. My sampling recruitment also included purposeful sampling as I have a specific criteria set in place in order to achieve in-depth and rich expertise to my research study. I reached out to the participants I had in mind and hoped they found interest in my study. I then asked these educators to forward my study focus to other teachers who they know are implementing ableist challenging strategies. Additionally, I also asked my peers if they know of any educators who are implementing the work I am focusing on in this study.

3.3.3. Participant biographies

Melissa

My first participant was Melissa. She identifies as a white, Catholic woman. At the time of the research Melissa was a fifty-five-year-old teacher who worked for almost 35 years in a large Catholic Elementary School. She has taught all grades from Kindergarten to Grade Six more than once. For the past six years, she has taught Grade Two. Melissa finds that her Catholic background, and working in a Catholic school helps her in her attempts to challenge ableism.

Her drive towards challenging ableism derives from her experiences with her daughter who is diagnosed as having a developmental delay. She claims that watching her daughter experience challenges in mainstream classrooms sparked her interest in challenging ableism. Melissa outlined that this focus came earlier in her career after her daughter had been in elementary school for a few years. Her experiences and passion towards combatting ableist thoughts were extremely beneficial for my research.
My second participant was Laura. She identified as white, Catholic women. At the time of the research, Laura was a thirty-four-year-old teacher who worked for ten years in a large Public Elementary School. Within her first two years as an educator she taught at the intermediate level at Grades Seven and Eight teaching geography. Over the past seven years as a teacher, she has taught Grade Five and Grade Six. At the time of the research, she was approaching the end of her maternity leave and going back into a Grade Six classroom.

Her background in teaching was beneficial to my research as she makes substantial effort within her classroom to foster inclusivity. In addition to her focus on inclusivity, she specifically focuses on challenging ableist thoughts within her classroom. Her focus on challenging ableism derived from her personal experiences with her niece who is diagnosed with autism. Although her focus on challenging ableism began a few years ago, she is extremely passionate about informing and supporting all students.

3.4 Data Analysis

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) suggest that interviewees add to meaning construction rather than contaminating the meaning construction, therefore interviewers need to be prudent when reporting their studies. In order to generate findings that transform raw data into new knowledge, a qualitative researcher must engage in active and demanding analytic processes throughout all phases of the research (Thorne, 2000). Specifically, all qualitative analysis includes understanding the phenomenon being studied, formulating a depiction of the phenomenon that considers connections and associations, theorizing about why and how these connections and associations appear, and then re-contextualizing (Thorne, 2000). Qualitative researchers are often more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people think and
feel about the circumstances in which they find themselves than they are in making judgments about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid (Thorne, 2000).

What makes a study qualitative is that it usually relies on an inductive reasoning processes to interpret and structure the meanings that can be derived from data (Thorne, 2000). Throughout this study, each interview was used as a tool which provided me with descriptions, narratives, and texts which I then interpreted and reported according to my research (Kvale, 2006). Throughout qualitative research, there is a review of interviews to interpret statements during the process of identifying and organizing patterns (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I used this approach within the analyzing and transcribing stage of each interview. From there, I began coding each transcript looking for common themes. This is a commonly used approach which relies on coding and sorting of similar content into separate categories for a final refining into major themes amongst all interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Wellington (2000) identifies the analytical stage in four parts; dividing data into ‘units’, filtering out what units are to be used, coding the units in recurring themes, and attempting to subsume subsequent units of data under these categories. This step by step process was used to analyze, organize, and code my data. Lastly I identified “null data”, which is of course what the participants did not speak to. It is important for me as a researcher to recognize what was not mentioned, and why.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

An awareness of the ethical challenges posed by qualitative methods is, in fact, a necessary first step in ethical decision making (Haverkamp, 2005, p. 148). When conducting qualitative research studies, it is imperative to be mindful of the ethical components involved.

Qualitative researchers can often deal with confidentiality issues through the sampling
process, and through technical safeguards when the data is analyzed and produced (Shaw, 2003, p. 15). For my research, all interview participants will be assigned a pseudonym. It is important to keep participant identities confidential, as well as any identifying markers related to schools they have, or are currently teaching at. Havercamp (2005) illustrates that *trustworthiness* between researcher and participant is a primary realm of ethics. The researcher carries a responsibility to have the best interest of the participant in mind.

Throughout my study, I notified my participants of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. Havercamp (2005) believes that reaffirming the participants right to withdraw from the study is a vital ethical consideration. This reinforces the care and integrity of the researcher, and may minimize any risk within the interview (Havercamp, 2005). Given the focus of research, I recognize that it is possible that a question may trigger an emotional response, making the participant feel vulnerable. I decided to minimize this risk by sending a sample of the interview questions to each participant prior to the interview, and by re-assuring them that they have the right to refrain from answering any question they do not feel comfortable with. The participants also had the opportunity to review my transcripts and to clarify, or retract any statements before I conducted my data analysis. All data, including audio recordings, will be stored on my password protected laptop and will be destroyed after five years. Finally, participants were asked to sign a consent letter providing their consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. The principle of informed consent is often required in qualitative research in order to protect participants (Shaw, 2003). This consent letter will also provide an overview of my study, address ethical implications, and specifies the expectation of participation of a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Within this research study, there are both methodological limitations and strengths. The areas that limit the study will include the ethical parameters of the MTRP. The ethical approval that has been granted to the MT students only involves interviews with teachers. Unfortunately, throughout this research process, I was not able to interview students or parents, conduct surveys, or observe classrooms. Additionally, my research involves speaking to a limited number of teachers. Although the semi-structured interview process have helped me outline meaningful experiences, the participants cannot generalize the experience of teachers on a broad sense. This is a common pitfall in most qualitative research (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Often times, samples are not large or diverse enough to represent the variation known to exist in the population being studied (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). An additional limitation includes, the researchers bias and personal interests can often effect the analysis stage of qualitative research (Yilmaz, 2013). It’s important to acknowledge one’s personal views in order to produce bias-free research findings.

Despite the limitations to this study, there are also methodological strengths. Interviewing teachers in a semi-structured format will allow me to hear their experiences with more depth and meaning as opposed to reviewing a survey (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Although handing out surveys may allow me to collect data from more participants, the interviews will produce more specific and elaborate responses. The interview process also allows for more flexibility for teachers to speak (Anyan, 2013), to what matters the most to them, and what strategies they have found to be successful and not successful in their experience. Interviews can thus validate the voices and lived experiences of these teachers. This has benefit my research as it gives me an opportunity to hear the teachers reflect on what specific practices
and theories they implement, what has worked for them, and what hasn’t.

3.7 Conclusion

Within this chapter I discussed the methodology of my research. I first discussed the research approach and procedure of using qualitative methods, its core components, and its pertinence to my study. I then illustrated my instruments of data collection outlining that semi-structured interviews will be my primary source of data. I also highlighted the different types of interviews generally implemented in qualitative research studies, and why semi-structured is most appropriate approach for me. I outlined how researchers argue that qualitative research provides in-depth understanding of an issue. Next, I outlined the criteria for my samples and justified why each one is pertinent to my study. Each educator had at least five years’ experience teaching in a mainstream classroom, has taught multiple exceptional students, and has a driving passion to challenging ableism. I also included how I have recruited my participants using purposeful, convenient, and snowball sampling. I then discussed how I will analyze the data from each interview looking for common themes, and producing coding to the data. I proceed to illustrate the ethical components involved in the study which include confidentiality, right to withdraw from the study at any time, obtaining consent, option to retract any statement after reviewing transcripts, and consideration of data storage and disposal. Lastly, I discuss both the methodological limitations and the strengths of my study. In Chapter Four, I will report my research findings.
Chapter Four: Themes and Key Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report and discuss the findings from my interviews with two elementary school educators; one from TCDSB, and one from YRDSB. Both of these teachers are committed to challenging ableism within mainstream, elementary school classrooms. My research purpose was to find ways in which elementary school teachers support exceptional pupils by challenging ableist beliefs which are embedded into the school environment. The main research question surrounding this study aims to identify how a small sample of elementary teachers working in inclusive classrooms challenge ableism through their everyday teaching practices, and what outcomes do they observe in terms of relationships between exceptional students and their peers. Within the data, four common themes emerged: Teachers believe that ableism is a socially constructed concept which excludes the exceptional pupil; Consistent practice is necessary when breaking the boundaries of ableism, supporting inclusivity, and providing success for all pupils; Teachers have been personally affected by ableist exclusion which brought them to their commitment in challenging ableism and fostering success for exceptional pupils; Teachers face challenges in terms of societal norms, traditional curriculum integration, and finding new and meaningful inclusive practices. Within each of the themes and subthemes, I will identify commonalities and difference that arose between both participants. I will outline how my findings connect to my research in Chapter Two, as well as identify the contradictions within the research.

4.1 Teachers Believe That Ableism is a Socially Constructed Concept Which Excludes the Exceptional Pupil.

Within the interviews, I discovered that both participants argued that the thoughts and
stereotypes which ableism exudes are socially constructed. This theme outlines both participants’ personal opinions on what they believe ableism is. Both teachers explained that they find ableism to stigmatize exceptional people while segregating them from the rest of society.

4.1.1 Teachers believe that ableism places a stigmatization on exceptional individuals.

Both participants stated that, to them, ableism is the assumption that an exceptional person cannot succeed the way a “able-bodied/minded” person can. Melissa identified that she believes the root of ableism is directly in the word disabled, “the way we see disabled people is in the word itself, dis-abled, which clearly means we see them as unable or unfit to function at societies standards.” Melissa believed that society has created the idea that those who are classified as “disabled” are therefore unable to achieve success. She outlined this belief as she argued that society thinks that exceptional people can’t achieve because they aren’t given the means to do so. She argued that society is constructed in a way that favours the non-exceptional individual. Additionally, she believed that if society was accommodating to all needs, then the words disabled and able would no longer be necessary. She believed that depending on the exceptionality, they may be able to complete the task, but they just go about it in a different way. Laura also argued that thinking through an ableist mindset is stigmatizing to the individual as society generally already assumes they are incapable. She regarded that “special needs students are sometimes placed at a disadvantage as their teacher or classmates already assume they cannot do something.” She noticed that in her teaching experience, people with exceptionalities are assumed unsuited for certain tasks which develops negative stereotypes about the individual. As Laura teaches Grade Five, she believed that sometimes, by the time a student gets to her class, they have already carried negative stereotypes with them for many years. In terms of Laura’s
experience, she believed that teachers who have the ableist mindset do not have faith in the exceptional individuals because they already presume that the child cannot succeed. Similar to Laura’s experience, Campbell (2009) argues that individuals with exceptionalities are subjected to lower expectations and their lives are devalued because they function differently than most people in society. As stated above, Laura expressed that she often sees teachers and students assuming that a pupil with exceptionalities cannot reach the academic standard, thus given lower expectations. Rauscher and McClintock’s (1996) definition of ableism align with both Laura and Melissa as they outline that it is a social system of discrimination and exclusion towards people who have mental, emotional, or physical exceptionalities.

Both participants believed that these negative stereotypes are socially constructed, and thus carry no validity. Laura noted that ableism favours those whom society constructs as “able” versus who society constructs as “un-able.” Both participants mutually agreed with this notation. Melissa went on to identify that she believes our society is built for the person who is “able”. She argued that, “the only reason we have disabled and able is because of the way society is built. My school, yes it’s old, but it in no way caters to someone in a wheelchair. No ramps, no elevators. It’s sad.” It was evident that both participants felt that through societal construction, individuals who are exceptional are classified as unable because of their differences.

4.1.2 Teachers find that ableism excludes and segregates exceptional pupils within the classroom.

The socially constructed stereotypes above often result in exclusion of exceptional individuals amongst their peers. The assumption that exceptional students cannot achieve success will usually create a boundary between them and their classmates. Laura acknowledges that she has witnessed this in her classrooms over the years: “Special needs students are usually
left out of the core of the classroom because their classmates think they don’t know how to play the game, or solve the math problem.” She noted that she sees the segregation occurring most often at recess. When students are playing games or walking with their friends, often times, Laura noticed the exceptional student alone or walking with a teacher. She also reflected on her experience during a physical education period which she shares with another grade five teacher. She explained that during this period, the exceptional student in the other class often sat on the bench or on the stage not participating in the activity. Laura argued that the pupil had no physical exceptionalities, and was extremely capable of grasping concepts and participating in almost all activities. She acknowledges that the other grade five teacher stated the student chose not to participate, but believed that it is the teacher’s responsibility to assure the student is participating and achieving success. She argued that if it was a non-exceptional student requesting to be exempted from classroom activities, the teacher would not allow it. Laura’s belief supports Marschark, Spencer, Adams, and Sapere’s (2011) claim that 50% of academic underachievement of exceptional pupils is due to the practices of the teacher. In the scenario Laura reflected on, the student was segregated from the whole group environment (Hehir, 2002).

Both teachers found segregation to be a common result of ableism. Melissa supported Laura’s claims above as she outlines a similar issue:

A few times I ask students to find a partner or a group, I avoid this now. Instead I try to create the groups ahead of time, which is unfortunate because I’d like to give students choice. I avoid this now because when I give them the freedom to do so the special needs student is always left out. No one wants to be their partner because they think they won’t get as good of a grade because of the negative stereotypes.

Laura found that in her experience, when ableism enters the classroom, the exceptional
individuals are negatively affected and excluded amongst peers. She argued that this social exclusion affects pupils’ educational success. She supported her argument by explaining that those who are not socially accepted by classmates develop insecurities within the class and often withdraw from discussion. She notices that students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or exceptionality will participate less. Melissa argued that when students carry an ableist presumption about the student, they avoid engaging with their exceptional peer. She found that oftentimes, the exceptional individual will begin to notice and withdraw from the classroom whole as they feel excluded and unwanted. These ableist beliefs both teachers discuss are invisibly embedded into the education system (Hehir, 2002). Ableism thus propels the idea that exceptional people will not fulfil the task as well as others, which results in a segregation from these individuals (Hehir, 2002). As stated above, Laura argued that often times she sees exclusion within the classroom results in exceptional pupils developing insecurities and often pulling away from class discussions with pers. Laura’s argument aligns with the work of Eriks-Brophy and Whittinham (2013) as they claim that when ableism is present, exceptional students will develop insecurities within the classroom which can lead to poor academic success and peer relationships.

4.2 Consistent Practice is Necessary When Breaking the Boundaries of Ableism, Supporting Inclusivity, and Providing Success for all Pupils.

This next theme focuses on what the participants believe is helpful when attempting to challenge ableism. Both participants outlined that consistency to the commitment must be made within the classroom. They also placed a strong emphasis on building an inclusive community amongst all students. Lastly, they both argued that it is imperative to normalize difference when
challenging ableism. Although they had different strategies, both teachers shared the common goal of normalizing difference.

4.2.1 Teachers find that consistent commitment must be made in order to successfully challenge ableist thoughts.

When trying to challenge negative social assumptions, both participants believed it is imperative for teachers to maintain a true commitment to the practice. Melissa stated that consistency is key with any type of skill or issue taught to students. She expressed that it is difficult to remain on one topic for a longer period of time due to all of the material teachers expected to get through. However, she acknowledged that putting in the additional planning and time is imperative to successfully challenge ableism. Melissa found that when she constantly uses inclusive language and normalizes difference every day, it becomes easier for ableist thoughts to diminish. She argued that a teacher does not always need to set aside a specific period to teach about difference and exceptionalities, but instead integrate it into the everyday classroom atmosphere. She found that once she made conscious efforts to modify her seating arrangements in class, groupings, charts in the room, classroom mottos, and everyday language, an inclusive and safe environment was fostered. Similarly, Laura found that one of the first steps to challenging ableism is keeping the teaching consistent within a classroom. She noted that “ableism does not need to be a subject you teach during the day, it should be something you make your students conscious of at all times.” Both participants argued that challenging ableism should be a part a teachers’ everyday routine. As a part of Laura’s teaching practice, she constantly checks in with her students by listening to the language they are using, and watching them at recess or in group work. Additionally, she outlined that it is especially imperative to evaluate oneself as a teacher. She emphasized that in order to prevent ableism inside of the
classroom, the teacher must evaluate their own practices to assure students are accepting towards all peers. She argued that although she is committed to challenging ableism, she must still make a conscious effort that she is not contributing to the socially constructed stereotypes. In relation to both participants’ belief of a strong commitment to the practice, it’s cited in Katz (2015), that teachers’ beliefs are critical to implementation, as “teachers’ attitudes, commitment, involvement and training in the program affect the results” (Ableser 2003, 84). Similarly, Eriks-Brophy and Whittinham (2013) argue that teacher attitudes are conducive to providing inclusivity and success for students with exceptionalities. Both Laura and Melissa’s claims align with this literature as Eriks-Brophy and Whittinham (2013) identify that teachers must have an openness to acquiring new skills and information, the ability to reflect and criticize one’s own teaching practices, and a commitment to social justice and equity of all students.

4.2.2 Teachers find that fostering common interests amongst students allow for community building and inclusion.

A large aspect for both participants was the idea of creating a classroom community. When discussing practices which they use to challenge ableism, both participants argued that building a community amongst one’s students is essential. Both Laura and Melissa found that inclusive practices foster a safe classroom community. Laura discussed different inclusive practices she integrates which specifically target peer relationships:

I think peer buddy work, or group work is so important. When I am creating groups I assure I am always rotating them; I even rotate the desk seating often times. I find this to be beneficial as students have a chance to work with different people, different needs, and understand the way each other work differently.

Melissa also believed that group work is essential when building positive relationships amongst
students. She believed that by constantly changing groups and allowing peers to work with one another, they begin to understand others as well as themselves. Both participants found that group or partner work gives students the opportunity to focus on their common interests and similarities, instead of their differences. They noticed that different friendships begin after multiple activities of group work. Both participants found that students were spending more time with other classmates whom they would normally not choose to work with, including exceptional students. They both argued that slowly the sense of community begins to form as all students within the class built a relationship. Additionally, Melissa mentioned that before any partner or group activity she reminds students of classroom rules they established which include respecting and considering others’ ideas and respectfully disagreeing. She noted that, by reminding them of the agreements, most of the time she observes students cooperating very well with one another. Melissa outlined that she has charts and posters on her classroom walls describing these classroom agreements. She also includes quotes about kindness and acceptance and constantly refers to them throughout the week. By actively fostering acceptance in their students, both participants are embodying Katz’s (2015) argument that by placing an emphasis on the social aspects of the classroom, peer interactions begin to improve. When the social atmosphere changes, a welcoming and inclusive community is built (Katz, 2015). When minimizing attention to exceptionalities, the focus shifts to finding commonalities and reducing ableist thoughts about these students (Bernacchio & Mullen, 2007). Both participants’ active commitment to integrating group or partner work aligns with DeMonchy, Pijil & Zandberg (2004), as they argue that integration is more than just being there. DeMonchy et al (2004), outline that students must participate and work alongside other pupils to help establish lasting relationships.
Melissa further indicated she instills these community building practices from the very first day of school. To her, the first week is vital when working on peer relationships. She outlined that sometimes for the first week, she does not even touch the curriculum as she focuses solely on students getting to know one another. She builds classroom agreements as a whole, students get to know each other through extensive group work. She believed that working in a Catholic school (TCDSB) allows her to integrate the monthly virtues into inclusivity and challenging ableism. She discussed her practices with the virtues:

- each month we devote our entire being to whichever virtue that comes up that week. We also have a random acts of kindness chart which we work on as a whole. This chart contributes to the virtues we are focusing on.

Melissa outlined that by instilling kindness, respect, and empathy into the classroom, it becomes easier for friendships to develop with exceptional students and their peers. Although the found literature did not specifically discuss using Catholic practices in challenging ableism, the general idea of creating community and eliminating difference through kindness and empathy is consistent in the research of Katz (2015).

**4.2.3 Teachers believe that normalizing difference helps challenge ableist beliefs.**

Throughout their interviews, both teachers outlined that normalizing difference was beneficial in challenging ableism and negative stereotypes. Although they both had similar thoughts, there was a contradiction found between what practices the participants used to do this.

Laura found that specifically talking about the exceptionality will help inform students about their differences. Laura outlined that she enjoys using read-alouds and different stories to help inform each of her students. She argued that read-alouds are extremely helpful even in the junior grades. She believed that using books which discuss different exceptionalities was a helpful
entryway in educating her students. Laura found that read-alouds supported her attempts in challenging ableism as students can begin to see their exceptional peers as members of the classroom who are not so different than them. Storey (2007) explores the strategy of read-alouds and videos which present the exceptional person in a positive light. When reading or watching a person with an exceptionality as fully capable members of society, students will begin to see them as someone society can admire (Storey, 2007). Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) found that by using these inclusive practices, students begin to form a social acceptance and understanding of exceptionalities. Research also finds that students will place labels on exceptional peers once they recognize there are differences between them (Eriks-Brophy & Whittinham, 2013). The participants’ goal to normalize difference is an aim to break down these labels.

Melissa’s practices differed from Laura’s as she does not specifically teach about the exceptionality within her class. She found that doing so singles out the student. Instead, she focuses on the ideas of difference and acceptance. She states that her goal with challenging ableism is not to inform the students about the exceptionality within the classroom, but that students respect difference. This block focuses on creating a classroom community where students feel a sense of belonging and respects diversity in their peers. Although Melissa does not explicitly discuss exceptionalities, she did attend to the fact that discussing difference is important. She mentioned a metaphorical strategy she uses with her students:

I use the concept of glasses. Some students have them, others don’t. I talk about how glasses is one thing that some individuals need but others do not. That doesn’t make them any less important, or needier because they need help to see, it just makes them different. Which is ok.
Melissa finds that the attention on exceptionalities is reduced when she focuses on the fact that every person in the world has different needs and wants. She believes that through this process, exceptional students experience more of a natural integration (Hehir, 2002) into the classroom. Within this natural integration which Melissa described, the exceptionalities of students are no longer seen as a defect, and ableist beliefs are slowly challenged (Bernacchio & Mullen, 2007). When diversity becomes accepted, she finds that students with exceptionalities feel more comfortable in the classroom. For her, placing an emphasis on the fact that difference is part of everyday life improves their contribution to the classroom. As both Laura and Melissa educate students about the different exceptionalities around the classroom or school, Tavares (2011) argues that this is essential in challenging ableism. By educating students, students have opportunities to base their attitudes towards exceptional peers on facts, not on negative stereotypes and assumptions (Tavares, 2011). Katz (2015) found that classrooms which implement inclusive practices which foster peer-awareness create a more positive learning environment where students feel safe to take risks.

4.3 Teachers Have Been Personally Affected by Ableist Exclusion, Which Brought Them to Their Commitment in Challenging Ableism and Fostering Success for Exceptional Pupils.

The third theme outlines why teachers have developed a commitment to challenging ableism, and why they believe it is important. Both participants were personally affected by ableism as they witnessed an exceptional family member who faced stereotypes and segregation. They also found that combatting ableism helps create a classroom of acceptance amongst all peers. Both participants mentioned that they believe challenging ableism is important as it fosters success both academically and socially for exceptional pupils. They argued that the positive results of challenging ableism do not only benefit exceptional students, but non-
exceptional students as well.

4.3.1 Teachers were inspired to challenge ableism through their experiences with an exceptional family member.

Both participants acknowledged that their inspiration for challenging ableism derives from having an exceptional family member. Laura reflected on her personal experiences with her cousin who has autism, while Melissa talked about her daughter who has a developmental delay. Laura mentioned that her drive for challenging ableism came quite a few years into her teaching career, while Melissa’s began very close to the beginning of her career. They both reflected on personal experiences where they witnessed their family member being subject to ableism. More specifically, they spoke mostly about the educational system neglecting the needs of their exceptional family members. Melissa mentioned how she began to hear about inclusivity just over ten years ago. She admitted that she did not think about it much until her niece entered grade two. She discusses the struggles she saw her sister and brother-in-law face while trying to foster the most success for their daughter. She describes her niece as having “high functioning” autism. She articulates that her niece was placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) but only receives accommodations for classroom work. She leaves the mainstream classroom for one period a day to work on subjects such as literacy as this is what she struggles with the most. What Laura discusses is the struggle her niece had with making strong friendships amongst her classmates. She specifically remembers her niece’s Grade Four birthday party where she did not invite any classmates as her niece felt she did not have friends to invite. Laura mentioned that as she continued to watch her niece’s struggles, she began to develop a desire to change the way these exceptional students felt. This is what she describes as inspiring her commitment to challenging ableism.
Melissa also had similar experiences to Laura’s, but in her case, the family member was her daughter. She also describes situations such as social exclusion which she watched her daughter face. Melissa acknowledged that her daughter is developed mentally delayed and is not always able to complete classroom work at the same pace and degree as her peers. She mentions that her daughter’s IEP requires her to have modified work at a lower grade level. She explained that although her daughter works at a lower grade level, she is entirely capable of maintaining a conversation with any person her age, or adult. Regardless, she recounted memories where her daughter was excluded from her classmates due to her differences. She also discusses moments of bullying which her daughter faced. DeMonchy et al, (2004) argue that bullying arises when peers are not properly educated about differences amongst classmates. Similar to Laura and Melissa’s experiences, DeMonchy et al (2004) also argue that students with exceptionalities who are socially excluded in the mainstream classroom can often harm their social-emotional development and often become a victim of bullying.

4.3.2 Teachers commit to challenging ableism as they find it creates a feeling of acceptance and safety for all students.

Both teachers argued that challenging ableism instills a safe classroom community for all students. Once they began their journeys of challenging ableism, they both found that a welcoming classroom climate is extremely vital to successfully combat stereotypes. Melissa reflected on her experiences of her students learning about empathy and difference every year. She mentioned a program she often uses called “Second Step” to help foster positive social relationships between classmates. She expressed that she believes Second Step was one of the ways in which she witnessed all of her students working together as a whole, while respecting each others’ differences. Melissa acknowledged that as her students began to respect and honour
diversity, the conversation shifted from “why does Marco [pseudonym] get to use the computer?” to “it’s Marco’s turn to use the computer.” The students acknowledge that Marco needs the computer for certain tasks and begin to support him in using it. While other students may be working with pencil and paper, they recognize every student has differences. She argued that through honouring one another, the exceptional student, or any student who requires accommodations, feels safe in their differences. Laura also found that by implementing a focus on honouring diversity, the atmosphere of the classroom begins to change. She argued that she discussed difference with her students, it is one step of challenging ableism which fosters an accepting community. She witnessed all classmates accepting one another, and anxious feelings of students begin to fade. Respecting diversity, as Katz (2015) defines as a component of UDL which helps teachers create a classroom which improves students’ self concept and sense of belonging, was a common theme. Katz (2015) outlines that through inclusivity, each student is honoured and respected for their needs, which allows for a welcoming classroom community.

4.3.3 Teachers commit to ableism as they find it fosters the most success for exceptional pupils both academically and socially.

Both participants argued that they believe challenging ableism is imperative to a classroom as it fosters success for all students. Throughout their interviews, both Melissa and Laura explained that once students begin to respect and honour diversity, the relationships between classmates grow. Melissa reflects on her practice:

I work very hard on improving friendships with all students. I of course can’t force kids to be friends, but I try and help them recognize their commonalities. Students may form a friendship with someone they may have never thought to.

Both participants believed that when an exceptional pupil is included within the mainstream
learning, students slowly recognize them as members of the classroom. Melissa found that as ableism finds its way outside of the classroom, exceptional students experience more success in the social climate of school. Laura argued that she believes teaching about diversity is something that benefits all students. Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) support this claim as they argue that inclusionary practices propose benefits for children without exceptionalities including a wider social acceptance, understanding of exceptionality, and enhanced socioeconomical growth. Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) also argue that special needs students exposed to inclusive practices result in substantial benefits in both academics and social skills. These developments start in the classroom environment and eventually extend to social contexts (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013).

Melissa noted that the safety established within the classroom community, allowed for the confidence of each student to grow. She argues that placing a strong emphasis on the classroom atmosphere benefits both exceptional and non-exceptional students. Melissa found that those students who are often withdrawn from classroom conversation began to participate more as the classroom community begin to develop into a welcoming and safe environment. She argued that once the social environment is positively established, exceptional pupils’ success in academics tend to rise. Laura also discussed noticing exceptional students participating more within whole group and small group conversations. She noted that they slowly felt more confident to ask questions or contribute when the class was taking up homework. Even if their answer was wrong, she was happy that they began to converse more freely. Laura noted, “as the students begin to participate more, they begin to grasp topics we’re discussing better. I notice their confidence go up, but also grades.” Laura’s notation supports the existing research; as cited in Ruijs and Peetsma (2009), Jepma’s (2003) research on exceptional students working in
inclusive mainstream classroom found that these students made more progress in academics such as language and math. Abell, Jung, and Taylor (2011) also found that once the atmosphere of a classroom becomes inclusive or universal, all students begin to feel included. Once they feel safe amongst their peers, both exceptional and non-exceptional pupils demonstrate more of interest in what they are learning (Abell et al, 2011).


The fourth and final theme which both participants discussed was the challenges they face while trying to combat ableism. They both found difficulty when trying to break down stereotypes and norms which are so deeply embedded into society. They also experienced challenges when trying to integrate ableism into the curriculum requirements. Lastly, they found that it was sometimes difficult to think of new ways to integrate ableist challenging practices. They noted that they were not trained on inclusive practices which help challenge ableism in their pre-teaching experience.

4.4.1 Teachers find difficulty in breaking down societal norms which are embedded in the education system.

Both teachers experienced some difficulty in their attempts to challenge ableism within the mainstream classroom. As stated earlier, both Melissa and Laura believe that ableist thoughts are socially constructed through societies favouring of the “able-bodied” person. Melissa mentioned that sometimes ableist thoughts are difficult to change once a child has been engrained in that type of thinking. She reflected on listening to students in the school yard, “I heard students using ableist language all the time, even teachers actually. It’s difficult to change a mindset that is fixed on the stereotype that if you have an exceptionality then you are unable.”
She also found that the societal norms of “able” vs “disabled” are engrained into the education system as many text books do not illustrate individuals with exceptionalities. Melissa believed that by constantly seeing the “white able-bodied” person in classroom work, it becomes difficult to challenge a students thought on exceptionalities. Similarly, Laura found difficulty in challenging students’ thoughts in grade five. She mentioned that as students travel with one another from grade to grade, they begin to develop thoughts about specific individuals. She reflected on a student she had in grade five who had autism. She mentioned that he was capable of completing almost all classroom tasks that his peers worked on. What she noticed was that at the beginning of the year the exceptional students’ peers thought they knew what he could and could not do. They began to speak for the exceptional pupil by telling her that he needed a calculator for math, or needed to go to the core resource room during language. She argued that if teachers from years before do not try to challenge these students’ thoughts, they will carry assumptions with them throughout every grade. In support of both Laura and Melissa’s claims, Kang (2009) argues that ableism has become a dominant sociocultural belief which is embedded into the school curriculum and school environment. Melissa’s challenges with school text books are reflected in the literature as Kang (2009) outlines that school textbooks and curriculum requirements have been recognized as reproducing ableism by constantly idealizing the “able” person within texts and literature.

4.4.2 Teachers believe having to teach to the curriculum poses challenges for their commitment towards reducing ableism.

Both participants experienced challenges when working to combat ableism within their classroom and working through curricular tasks. They found difficulty in trying to meet all the curricular expectations, while placing an additional emphasis on diversity, acceptance, and
inclusion. Laura mentioned that it is sometimes difficult for her to teach about exceptionalities and link it to the curriculum:

It becomes a little challenging for me to think of meaningful ways to link challenging ableism to the curriculum. We don’t have a subject for that. I remember once connecting it to physical education but I didn’t like the way it turned out. I made a mistake and think I tokenized the physically exceptional student. I of course include challenging ableism into every day by using inclusive language, honouring difference, and so forth. But subject wise, it’s difficult. I integrate it into media literacy with a project I assign where students have to research an exceptional hero or celebrity who has achieved great success. It’s always fun for the kids.

Laura argued that sometimes she feels as though there is not enough time in a day to teach all of the things we have to, then all of the things we want to. Melissa also experienced similar challenges. She stated that it is easier for her to integrate challenging ableism into her religion class, but otherwise finds difficulty into incorporating specific discussion about diversity in any other subject other than literacy. The challenges both participants’ experienced with planning time align with Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) as they argue that teaching inclusively requires the teacher to put in additional time and effort in order to successfully challenge ableism. Additionally, Katz (2015) found that educators believe that there is limited planning time in a teaching day.

**4.4.3 Teachers experience challenges when trying to find new ways in which to foster inclusivity.**

Throughout their interviews, both teachers stated that they experienced challenges specifically at the beginning of their journeys in combatting ableism. They both felt that it is
difficult to think of new ways to include exceptional individuals in mainstream learning as it was not taught to them in their educational experience. Melissa found that challenging ableism requires extra effort from the classroom teacher as they are often seeking help and finding resources on their own. She believed that now after years of this practice, it has become easier, but still wished she knew more. Laura reflected on similar challenges. She discussed how her commitment towards ableism didn’t start until later in her career as it wasn’t a topic that was talked about much. She mentioned that when she was a beginning teacher, exceptional students were almost always removed from her classroom and taught in segregated rooms. She admits that she did not always have to think about having to include the exceptional pupil quite often. Laura reflects on when she began to develop a commitment to challenging ableism, it was difficult for her as resources were extremely limited. As stated above, both participants outlined that their teacher training did not successfully teach them about inclusionary practices of exceptional pupils. Aligning with the literature, Abell et al. (2011) notes that some educators have not been provided the proper knowledge of inclusive practices and thus have difficulty challenging ableism within their classrooms. Similarly, Hehir (2002) argues that educators require preparation programs that recognize specific needs of exceptional students and ensure that teachers have the skills necessary to support these children’s needs

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that teachers challenging ableism in mainstream classrooms perceive substantial benefits for both exceptional students and non-exceptional students. It also found that teachers have multiple strategies for normalizing and respecting diversity within the classroom. These strategies, which integrate with both inclusivity and UDL, encourage students to critically reflect on their experiences, while recognizing difference as a
part of everyday life. They also allow students to build strong peer relationships, and a sense of a safe classroom community. The findings make a significant contribution to the existing literature as my research focuses on how teachers naturally integrate challenging ableism into everyday teaching. The natural integration of exceptional pupils was a gap I found in the existing literature. Next, in Chapter Five, I discuss different implications for each of my findings. I will give recommendations which I believe can be utilized by existing and future educators, as well as note potential areas of further research.

Chapter Five: Implications and Findings

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the overall implications and significance of this research study. I begin by reviewing my key findings on how teachers in mainstream classrooms challenge ableism and foster inclusivity amongst all students. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings, both for the educational community and my own practice as a beginning teacher. I then make recommendations, which may be utilized by other educational professionals, such as the teacher education programs, schools, and teachers. Finally, I pose questions and suggest areas that I feel would benefit from further research and discussion.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Both Laura and Melissa argued that ableism is a socially constructed concept which should be challenged in order to allow for positive peer awareness and relationships. Melissa argued that society is constructed in ways that favour the non-exceptional individual, thus placing the exceptional person at a disadvantage. She furthers this by stating that the assumption
about different abilities is in the word disability itself. She argues that society has constructed this idea that the “disabled” person is unable, thus assuming they cannot function the way a “non-disabled” person can. Both participants argued that these socially constructed presumptions and stereotypes often find a way into the classroom as students carry these ideas. Laura specifically discussed her experience where she saw that the teacher assumed the student with an exceptionality could not complete a task and often gave them other work to complete. She argued that this puts the student at a disadvantage as they are left out of the whole-class discussion. She also argued that peers also carry these assumptions as she has witnessed students not choosing exceptional pupils as partners in classroom work. Both Laura and Melissa outline that these experiences developed their personal practice to challenge ableist thoughts within their own classrooms in order to foster the most success and inclusion for all students.

Both participants found that it is extremely imperative to maintain a constant practice in challenging ableism within the classroom. Melissa outlined that every day she uses inclusive language, activities, and has discussions on difference and acceptance. Both Melissa and Laura believed that teaching about ableism and eliminating ableism thoughts does not have to have a specific time period within the day. Instead, they argued that empathy and acceptance should become a natural part of the classroom atmosphere. They are extremely dedicated to maintaining the positive classroom environment as they remain constant and committed to their practice. Teachers begin establishing a safe and welcoming classroom climate from the very first day of school, thus integrating the combat of ableism into the daily routine. These teachers of mainstream classrooms challenge ableism in a multitude of ways. They often work to normalize difference within their classroom. One of the teachers stated that she does this by using a metaphor of glasses in a discussion of student difference, explaining that some people
need glasses to see while others do not. She then connects this example to other differences in order for students to recognize and accept that every person has different needs. One educator also argued that it is important for her to discuss different exceptionalities whether physical or mental with her students. She illustrated that this was an imperative step in fostering awareness of difference. She often used read-aloud activities to introduce different exceptionalities to her class. Additionally, teachers argued that group and peer work was beneficial in building a classroom community. They used group work as an opportunity to foster common interests amongst peers while allowing all students a chance to work with one another.

As illustrated in the previous chapter of this study, teachers believe that exceptional pupils who face ableism are faced with stigmatization and segregation inside and outside of the school context. Their passion to challenging ableism derived from their personal experiences with an exceptional family member. They witnessed their family members with exceptionalities face seclusion and stereotypes by teachers and classmates. They both argued that the stereotypes their teachers and peers had resulted in lower self-esteem and academic success for their exceptional family members. Both Laura and Melissa reflect on their experiences of their exceptional family members who have had difficulty building strong friendships with their classroom peers. They argued that they believed their exceptionalities were the reasons for their limited friendships as their differences often carried stereotypes. Both participants work to foster a safe classroom community for all students in order to assure the feelings of exclusion their family members faced are not present amongst their students. Melissa specifically stated that after she had class discussions about respect and honouring diversity, her students began to acknowledge and accept the different needs students had. Both Laura and Melissa found that as the students began to accept and honour one another, stronger relationships began to grow.
amongst all peers. Laura furthered this claim by stating that as the classroom environment became more positive and accepting, the exceptional students gained more confidence and participated in whole-class and group work.

Within my conducted study, it was noted by both teachers that they faced challenges when working to break down the societal stereotypes of ableism. Teachers found that oftentimes, especially in later grades, students already have preconceived ideas about a student with any exceptionality. They argued that exceptional pupils were often stereotyped as unable by their peers due to the differences they had. They both outlined that constant discussion and practice with normalizing difference and fostering empathy and acceptance is required in order to challenge stereotypes. Teachers also illustrated that they faced challenges in implementing meaningful inclusive practices with the traditional curriculum. They believed that oftentimes, when an educator is excepted to teach to the curriculum expectations, the building of a safe classroom community is at risk. They argued that it is important to seek help and find alternative resources which can support an educator in challenging ableism through curriculum expectations.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I outline the implications of my research for both those in the educational research community – including school boards, schools, and educational professionals – and my own practice and development as a new teacher.
5.2.1 The educational research community

The strategies used to combat ableism within mainstream classroom support students both socially and academically. They facilitate inclusion for all and foster positive peer relationships and a safe classroom climate. Both participants argued that by challenging ableism within their classrooms, a means of success is found for all students. The Ministry of Education’s Achieving Excellence: Ensuring Equity document (2014) outlines that Ontario has a positive reputation for excellence and equity. Although this is true, the document states that there is more work to be done to ensure that all students are provided the opportunity to succeed. They outline four goals for education, which are achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence. I believe that challenging ableism and instilling inclusivity can help support each of these goals. The findings of my study demonstrate that combatting ableism not only supports students academically, but can promote their well-being and enhance confidence in themselves. Thus, I believe that my study is significant to the educational research community.

Both participants outlined that there are existing challenges with challenging ableism within their classrooms. They argued that substantial support is necessary in order to find success in reducing ableist thoughts. In order to meet the needs of all students both academically and socially, educators believed that support from colleagues and the greater school community is beneficial. Inclusionary resources and community building activities provided by the greater educational research community may play a role in supporting teachers in challenging ableism. Both participants also acknowledged that all educators should have experience teaching or learning about exceptional pupils during pre-service teaching. They outlined that studying
theoretical frameworks may help support teachers when putting these strategies and ideas into practice. I believe my study is significant to the educational research community as it is necessary for all school communities to work together to organize Professional Development (PD) days to educate teachers on these inclusive practices. The school community plays a role in a collaborating process on creating a plan to help support all students and create a welcoming atmosphere. I also believe it is beneficial to the educational research community if pre-service teachers are trained on exceptionalities, difference, and acceptance prior to entering a mainstream classroom.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice

I have always had a passion towards working with exceptional students. Through volunteer work with my sister who is diagnosed as having a developmental delay, I have developed a commitment towards fostering safe school environments for exceptional individuals. After my first teaching experience, I began to recognize what inclusivity, empathy, and challenging ableism would look like within a classroom. After conducting research on challenging ableism, I am confident I have furthered my own understanding of inclusive practices and honoring diversity. I am committed to fostering many of the techniques and strategies teachers use to challenge ableism in my future teaching practice.

After hearing the perspectives of the participants, it is evident that to find success in challenging ableism, it is imperative to maintain a constant practice and dedication towards inclusive practices. As an educator both inside and out of the classroom, I will constantly integrate inclusionary language and activities for all individuals. In order to create the safest and comfortable environment for my future students, I will implement empathy and acceptance as an
integral part of my classroom. I will allow this new knowledge to inform my teaching as I set goals towards accepting, celebrating, and including all students of the classroom in both educational and social aspects. Through my research findings, I understand that fostering common interests amongst students is beneficial in building a strong peer community. As a teacher, I want to create opportunities for students to work together based on their inquiries and interests, in order to build relationships. By using group or peer buddy work, students engage in discussion and may begin to discover common interests, thus developing respectful friendships.

As both participants suggested, celebration of all individuals can be done by breaking down societal norms. With this in mind, I want to focus my commitment to challenging ableism on normalizing difference. I want to provide my future students with awareness about different needs within our school, and within society. Through my research, I recognize that having discussions with students about difference can help normalize exceptionalities. I will create opportunities for these discussions through read-aloud periods, community building activities, and empathy practices. These strategies will aim to build awareness about different abilities each student has; not only the exceptional pupils. Additionally, they will focus on minimizing societal stereotypes about exceptional individuals, and allow students to recognize and accept diversity amongst all. My conducted research identifies that engaging in these opportunities will avoid segregation both inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition to inclusive strategies to build kindness, empathy, and respect into my safe classroom climate, I want to use inclusivity to support students academically. I am extremely passionate about meeting the needs of all students in my future classroom. As a teacher, I aim to build my lessons which meet the needs of all types of learners. I will also use any accommodations or modifications when necessary to avoid any anxieties towards classroom
work. I will assure the social aspect of my classroom community is comfortable for all students, thus allowing them to feel secure and confident when completing academic work. Through my research study, I recognize that creating this positive classroom climate often results in exceptional students contributing more to whole class discussions. They also felt comfortable to ask clarification questions on their assigned tasks.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section I outline the recommendations I suggest for faculties of education, school communities, and teachers. I will discuss some of the strategies or ideas I believe people should do in order to find more success in challenging ableism in mainstream classrooms. In the field of education, I believe teachers and the school community is constantly learning and finding different ways to improve their practice.

5.3.1 Faculties of education

I believe there should be pre-service educational training in teaching and supporting exceptional pupils provided to all teachers prior to entering practice. Research argues that many educators feel unprepared when trying to implement inclusive practices and teaching exceptional students (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Teachers feel that their education programs insufficiently prepared them for teaching and accommodating exceptional pupils within the classroom (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). One of my suggestions is that faculties of education provide all pre-service teachers with a mandatory special education training programs prior to entering into teaching. These courses may allow teachers to learn theoretical frameworks which can be put into practice to assure success for all students. These mandatory courses could provide educators with strategies that focus on including exceptional pupils in both
the social and academic realms of the classroom. I strongly believe that the strategies taught in inclusive classrooms are beneficial for all educators, not only teachers working to combat ableism.

**5.3.2 Schools**

Within my research, both participants argued that community is at the core of challenging ableism. Although teachers talked mostly about their individual classroom communities, I believe the whole school community contributes to inclusion of exceptional students. I suggest that schools put practices into place which ask teachers to discuss difference, acceptance, and empathy with their students. I also believe that there should be school agreements in addition to classroom agreements which create a safe climate for all students. I believe that if schools implement a school-wide focus on this practice, it helps support teachers who are working towards eliminating ableist thoughts. Additionally, I suggest that schools have resources such as books or videos which help inform students on difference, and eliminate stereotypes. It is important for teachers to have some resources or strategy ideas available to them. I believe that by schools providing the teacher community with extra resources, it can help support educators in this process.

**5.3.3 Teachers**

My final suggestion is what I believe is most imperative in challenging ableism. As indicated in the previous chapter, educators experience challenges in their attempts to combat ableism. Both of the participants in my study outlined that in order to overcome these challenges, there must be a strong commitment to the practice. They argued that challenging
ableism requires a strong and constant effort from the individual teacher. I strongly believe that it is the teacher's job to work with different strategies and to not give up if one does not work the way it was planned. Although this practice may require additional time and effort from the teacher, I believe it this is imperative to teaching practice in general as it supports all students. I also suggest that educators seek out additional help from other colleagues, special education specialists, or core resource teachers. As the participants argued, there are limited resources available for them and it is important to seek out resources or strategies on your own. I believe that colleagues within the school can share ideas which can help support all educators in challenging ableism within their students.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

After conducting my research, I have recognized there are further areas in this study where I believe more research should be completed. In general, there is limited research I found on combating ableism within the mainstream classroom. I believe that more research should be done that studies the long-term effects on individuals who have been taught in schools which have extensive effort to challenging ableism. Much of the existing literature have examined students during a few months to one-year period. I believe it would be beneficial if further research is conducted on how ableism effects individuals over a longer period of time in comparison to those who are taught in inclusive classrooms.

I also believe that further research should be explored in the social effects of challenging ableism and inclusive classrooms. I would like to learn more about how the social environment effects a students’ academics. The majority of research on inclusionary practices place a focus on academics as opposed to social wellbeing. One of the participants, Laura, mentioned how, in
her experience, exceptional pupils who felt comfortable within the classroom and had positive peer relationships with classmates excelled more in academics. She noted that oftentimes, exceptional individuals felt more confident in answering questions in class and contributing to whole-class discussions. I am confident that my research has built upon the existing research of the class environment effecting the social and academic realms of education but believe there is further research to be done in this area.

5.5 Concluding Comments

In this chapter, I provided a short summary of the themes found within Chapter Four of my study. My research outlined that both participants saw ableism as a concept which is socially constructed and carries negative stereotypes for exceptional individuals. They believed that these stereotypes result in exclusion, both socially and academically, for students with exceptionalities. Both participants also acknowledged that a constant practice in challenging ableism is required in order to find success for all students. They outlined that having discussions about difference and acceptance is beneficial in breaking down ableist thoughts and stereotypes. Laura and Melissa have family members with exceptionalities which brought them to their commitment in combatting ableism within the mainstream classroom. They witnessed their family members develop low self-esteem in both academics and socially due to the lack of inclusion and friendships they built within their school. When combatting ableism, it is important to provide students with opportunities to work with peers and build positive relationships, while also meeting all academic needs. Lastly, it was found that teachers experienced challenges in their attempts to reduce ableist thoughts as there was limited support and resources available to them. They also found that ableist thoughts are often embedded into
the individual and the educator must remain constant in their work to reduce these stereotypes.

I then highlighted what I believe the educational research community should learn from my study. My study outlines that combatting ableism can help support some of the goals the Ministry of Education (2014) has presented. I believe it is important for this community to learn about the positive effects challenging ableism has in order to provide the most success for all students. I also discussed the implications for myself. Similar to the participants in my study, my passion towards combatting ableism comes from my personal experience with my sister. I will integrate the strategies and techniques both participants outlined in my future teaching practice. I will use ideas such as diversity discussions, read-alouds which discuss exceptionalities and difference, group work, safe classroom language, and classroom agreements.

Next, I outlined some of the recommendations I have for Teacher Education Programs, school communities, and teachers. I strongly believe that the Faculty of Education should provide mandatory courses all teachers should take which focus on students with exceptionalities. The Special Education courses the Faculty provided are not mandatory, and I believe they should be. I also believe that school communities should create a school-wide approach and plan which foster inclusion for all. Educators should collaborate to build ideas and gather resources on combating ableism. Lastly, I recommend that all teachers remain deeply committed to this practice. As both participants outlined, not every strategy a teacher learns about will work for each classroom. It is the teachers job to implement many different techniques in order to foster the most success possible. I also recommend that the teacher seek out additional help and resources from other colleagues who have experience in this area of study.

Lastly, I highlight what I believe are areas for further study. In my experience, most of
the existing literature I found focuses on academic success in the present. I believe that research conducted on the long-term effects of individuals who have been taught in schools which combat ableism would be beneficial. I also found that most of the research I encountered have conducted studies on academic success. Although there is existing literature on the social aspects of combatting ableism, I argue that further research should be completed in this area. I believe that this will help support the study of challenging ableism within mainstream classroom.
References


Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date: April 12, 2016

Dear __________________________,

My name is Andrea Guglielmi and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how elementary teachers challenge ableism within the mainstream classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have demonstrated a leadership in supporting students with exceptionalities within the mainstream classroom. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Andrea Guglielmi
andrea.guglielmi@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
E-mail: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

**Consent Form**

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by _____________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how a small sample of teachers is challenging ableism within the mainstream classroom setting. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on my main research focus. The questions are divided into five steps, beginning with your background information, your perspectives and beliefs on the topic, teaching practices, the supports and challenges, and finally the next steps. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Background Information**

1. How many years have you been a full-time teacher in the mainstream classroom?
2. Do you have any experience working in special education classrooms? If so, what?
3. What grades/subjects do you currently teach? What have you previously taught?
4. What experience do you currently have working with students with exceptionalities within the mainstream classroom?
5. In addition to your teaching role, are you involved in any additional roles at the school?
6. Can you tell me more about the school you teach in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities, approximate numbers of students with special needs)
7. As you know, I am interested in speaking with you today about your experience with
challenging ableism in mainstream classrooms. Can we start by you telling me more
about what experiences contributed to you developing a commitment to this area, and
what experiences have helped prepare you for this work?

a. Personal experiences? (e.g. own experience in K-12 schools, family/friends)

b. Educational experiences? (e.g. undergraduate or graduate studies, teachers
college, professional development)

c. Professional experiences? (e.g. observations from teaching experience,
employment/jobs, particular positions held)

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

8. What does ableism mean to you? How do you define ableism?

9. In your view, what are indicators of ableism? How do you recognize ableism when you
see it?

10. Why do you believe it is important to challenge ableism in schools?

11. In your experience, to what extent is ableism commonly challenged in schools/teaching?
   Why do you think that is?

12. What are your current or past experiences with seeing ableism at play in schools and in
the mainstream classroom? What have you observed?

13. What does an inclusive classroom look like to you? What does it mean to have an
   inclusive classroom?

14. Do you believe that challenging ableism and inclusivity go hand in hand? Or do you see
   them as two separate entities? Why?

Teacher Practices

15. How do you teach for inclusion? Do you employ any specific strategies when
implementing inclusive practices to your teaching? How did these work? Which ones, and why?

16. How do you inform your students of the exceptionalities within the classroom without risking tokenization?

17. How do you involve/include the exceptional students with the rest of the students in the classroom?

18. How do you introduce your students to the notion of ableism?

19. How do students respond to learning about ableism?

20. What range of opportunities for learning do you create for students to learn about ableism?

21. Are there any specific resources you use to challenge ableism and celebrate exceptionalities within the classroom?

22. Can you provide me with some examples of how you have taught about ableism?
   a. Where, is at all, did you connect this work to the curriculum?
   b. What were your learning goals?
   c. What did you do? What did you have students do?
   d. How did students respond? What indicators of learning did you observe from them?
   e. What do you assess in these lessons and how?

23. If you witness ableist beliefs arising amongst students, what strategies do you employ to challenge these?

24. How do your students respond in these instances?

Supports and Challenges
25. What support systems are available to you when trying to employ inclusivity and reduce ableism?

26. What factors support you in this work? (e.g. school climate, supportive admin, program priorities of school)

27. What challenges and barriers do you encounter when challenging ableism in your teaching? How do you respond to these challenges? How might the education system help you further respond to these challenges?

Next Steps

28. As a beginning teacher who is very passionate about supporting students with exceptionalities, what advice do you have for me or other teachers?

29. What next steps do you think I should take in trying to find even more strategies that support exceptional students?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.